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The Conspiracy of Modern Art

Luiz Renato Martins
Edited by Steve Edwards

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The Conspiracy of Modern Art

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The Conspiracy of Modern Art

By

Luiz Renato Martins

Edited and Introduced by

Steve Edwards

Translated by

Renato Rezende



BRILL

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Credits

The Conspiracy of Modern Art

Presentations

A conspiração da arte moderna, Seminário Leon Trotsky (1940–2010) [05–19.10.2010], Arquivo Edgard Leuenroth/ Centro de Estudos Marxistas – CEMARX, Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas – IFCH, Universidade Estadual de Campinas – UNICAMP, 19.10.2010;

La conspiración del arte moderno, III Seminario Internacional de Políticas de la Memoria ‘Recordando a Walter Benjamin: Justicia, Historia y Verdad. Escrituras de la Memoria’ (28.10–30.10.2010), Centro Cultural de la Memoria Haroldo Conti, Buenos Aires, 28.10.2010;

La conspiración del arte moderno, Seminar ‘Philosophy of Methods in Art History and Visual Culture’ (dir. David Craven), Department of Art & Art History/ The Latin American & Iberian Institute, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, 08.09.2011;

Fisionomias da Arte Contemporânea, II Simpósio de Estética – Fisionomias da Arte Contemporânea, PUC-SP (23–26.04.2012), coord. Sônia Campaner, na mesa ‘Herança das vanguardas’, Programa de Estudos de Pós-Graduados em Filosofia, Departamento de Filosofia da PUC-SP, São Paulo, 25.04.2012;

A conspiração da arte moderna, Seminário Cultura do Desmanche/ A Formação e a Espada, Centro de Estudos Desmanche e Formação de Sistemas Simbólicos, DESFORMAS-CENEDIC-CEMARX/ ECA-FFLCH/USP-UNICAMP, Casa de Cultura Japonesa, USP, São Paulo, 30.08.2012.

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The Hemicycle: The Image of the Nation-Form

Presentations

Nação por revolução, Arte e Política: Encontro das Artes das Universidades Estaduais, Instituto de Artes, UNESP, São Paulo, 29.06.2007;

Nação por revolução ou uma investigação sobre o poder da forma/ O hemicycle: templo político e cosmos laico, V Colóquio Internacional Marx Engels (06–09.09.2007), Centro de Estudos Marxistas – CEMARX, Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas – IFCH, UNICAMP, Campinas, 09.09.2007;

Nación por revolución o el poder concreto de la forma/ El hemicycle como templo político y cosmos laico, XXXI Colóquio Internacional de Historia del Arte, *El Futuro* (15–18.10.2007), Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, UNAM, Centro Cultural Santo Domingo, Oaxaca, 17.10.2007;

Publications

'O hemicycle: imagem da forma-Nação', in Revista *Crítica Marxista*, n. 29, São Paulo, Editora UNESP, 2009, pp. 123–133;

'Nación por revolución o el poder concreto de la forma/ El hemicycle como templo político y cosmos laico', in Alberto Dallal (ed.), *El Futuro* – XXXI Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte, Cidade do México, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México – UNAM, 2010, pp. 267–279;

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Marat by David: Photojournalism

Publications

'Uma aproximação de *A Morte de Marat* (1793), de Jacques-Louis David', in revista *Ars*, n. 3, ECA-USP, São Paulo, 2004, pp. 62–65 (corresponds to the final part of the text '*Marat*, por David ...', after the sub-title 'Near and Far'); transcription of an immediate interpretation test of David's work, carried out during a selection process for professor in December 2002;

'La photographie politique anticipée, *Marat assassiné*, David', in François Soulages (org.), *Le Pouvoir & les Images – Photographie & Corps Politiques*, Paris, Klincksieck, 2011, pp. 81–91;

'*Marat em seu último suspiro*, por David: a arte do fotojornalismo', in revista *Terceira Margem*, Revista do Programa de Pós-graduação em Ciência da Literatura da UFRJ, ano XV, nº 24, Rio de Janeiro, UFRJ, 2011, pp. 39–53;

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Eighteenth Brumaire, the Fabrication of a Totem: Freud, David and Bonapartism

Presentations

O olho e a ordem na era dos culottes, painel do GT 'Marx e a tradição dialética', XIII Encontro Nacional de Filosofia 06–10.10.2008, ANPOF, Canela, RS, 08.10.2008;

Regard et miroir, image et monnaie: formes visuelles du tabou dans le totem bonapartiste, par Jacques-Louis David, Colóquio Freud et l'Image (03–05.04.2009),

4ème colloque du Centre de Recherches Interdisciplinaires sur les Mondes Ibériques Contemporains – CRIMIC, Université de Paris IV/ Savoirs et Clinique – Association de formation permanente em Clinique Psychanalytique, Paris, École Normale Supérieure, 05.04.2009;

A Fabricação de um Totem: David, Freud e o bonapartismo, Seminário Cultura do Desmanche/ A Formação e a Espada, Centro de Estudos Desmanche e Formação de Sistemas Simbólicos, DESFORMAS-CENEDIC-CEMARX/ ECA-FFLCH/USP-UNICAMP, 25.03.2011.

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'A fabricação de um totem: David, Freud e o bonapartismo', in *Mouro/ Revista Marxista*, ano 5, nº 8, São Paulo, Núcleo de Estudos d'O Capital/ Ideographos, dezembro de 2013, pp. 29–40;

'La fabrication d'un totem: David, Freud et le bonapartisme', in *Savoirs et Clinique/ Revue de Psychanalyse/ Freud et l'Image*, nº 12, Toulouse, Érès, 2010, pp. 137–145.

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Remains of Voluptuousness

Presentations

Vestigios de Voluptuosidad, XXXVI Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte, *Los estatutos de la imagen: creación-manifestación-percepción* (09–11.10.2012), Mesa 4: Documento y Monumento: 'Imágenes Históricas', Instituto de Invest-

igaciones Estéticas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México – UNAM, Ciudad de México, 11.10.2012.

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‘Vestigios de Voluptuosidad’, in Linda Báez Rubí y Emilie Carreón Blaine (ed.), *Los estatutos de la imagen, creación-manifestación-percepción* – XXXVI Coloquio Internacional de Historia del Arte, Cidade do México, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México – UNAM, 2014, pp. 315–343;

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The Returns of Regicide

Presentations

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Presentations

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Two Scenes on the Commodity

Publications

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'Os corpos e suas energias' (e seq.), in Luiz Renato Martins, *Manet: Uma Mulher de Negócios, um Almoço no Parque e um Bar*, Zahar, Rio de Janeiro, 2007, pp. 62–75 (rewriting).

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Painting as Labour-Form

Publication

‘A práxis como fundamento da pintura’ (capítulo 2), in Luiz Renato Martins, *A Fabricação da Pintura/ de Manet a Rothko*, PhD thesis, depart. de Filosofia, Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas, Universidade de São Paulo, advised by prof. dr. Paulo Eduardo Arantes, São Paulo, 2000, pp. 106–159.

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Transition from Constructivism to Productivism, According to Tarabukin

Presentations

‘A teoria da arte construtivista, segundo Nikolai Tarabukin’, in *Construtivismos: Revolução Russa 1917–1929; América Latina 1940–1979, Desenvolvimentismo*, Centro Cultural Banco do Brasil, São Paulo, 13.02.2002;

‘A idéia da morte da pintura e o debate entre o produtivismo e o construtivismo na arte revolucionária soviética’, in *Seminário de Pesquisa em Artes Visuais*, coord. Elida Tessler, Instituto de Artes, Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, 25.07.2002;

'O Debate: Produtivismo Versus Construtivismo e o Tema da Morte da Pintura na URSS da Década de 1920', in *Ciclo de Cultura de Greve/Greve é Formação*, Escola de Comunicações e Artes, Universidade de São Paulo (ECA-USP), São Paulo, 23.09.2003.

Publication

'O debate entre o construtivismo e o produtivismo, segundo Nikolai Tarabukin', in Revista *Ars*, ano 1, n. 2, Departamento de Artes Plásticas, ECA-USP, São Paulo, 2003, pp. 57–71;

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Publications

'A arte entre o trabalho e o valor', in revista *Crítica Marxista*, nº 20, Editora Revan, São Paulo, 2005, pp. 123–138;

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'Economia política da arte moderna/ providências para uma história crítica', in revista ARS, nº 12, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Artes Visuais da ECA/ Departamento de Artes Plásticas, Escola de Comunicações e Artes – USP, São Paulo, December 2008, pp. 81–90 (rewriting).

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Political Economy of Modern Art II: Lessons and Modes of Use

Publications

'Conclusion', in Luiz Renato Martins, *A Fabricação da Pintura/ de Manet a Rothko*, PhD thesis, depart. de Filosofia, Faculdade de Filosofia, Letras e Ciências Humanas, Universidade de São Paulo, advised by prof. dr. Paulo Eduardo Arantes, São Paulo, 2000, pp. 403–413;

'Economia política da arte moderna – II/ notas para uma sistematização provisória', in revista ARS, nº 14, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Artes Visuais da ECA/ Departamento de Artes Plásticas, Escola de Comunicações e Artes – USP, São Paulo, December 2008, pp. 49–59.

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Painting, Between *Gewalt* and Labour: Introduction to *The Conspiracy of Modern Art*

Steve Edwards

The Conspiracy of Modern Art is the first volume of essays to appear in the Historical Materialism Book Series by the Brazilian art historian and critic Luiz Renato Martins. While Martins' work is more familiar to a Hispanic audience it is almost entirely unknown in the English-speaking world. This collection brings together Martins' essays on classic European and North-American modern art; the follow-up books gather his writings on Brazilian art, contemporary art and film. Book-length studies are excluded from this edition and readers familiar with Portuguese may wish to consult his *Manet: Uma Mulher de Negócios, um Almoço no Parque e um Bar* (2003).¹

During the 1980s the Anglophone debate on the French art of the nineteenth-century was extensive, lively and pathbreaking. It was the central terrain on which new work, informed by Marxism and Feminism, broke the formalist consensus that had long dominated the discussion of modern art.² Commodity culture; massified leisure; the gendered gaze; gentrification; colonial fantasy; and revolution(s) were shown not to be 'background' incidents, but the very stuff of modern art. Indeed, a new orthodoxy subsequently took shape that took bits of Marx (commodification, *The Eighteenth Brumaire*) and combined them with Simmel (shock) and Benjamin's work on Baudelaire and applied the mix to Impressionism and other currents in French art of the period. Feminist thinkers deepened the story by thinking about the 'gendered spaces of modernity' and who was on display.³ Molly Nesbit's intervention, which has never received the attention it warrants, moved the debate off the grand boulevards

1 Martins 2007.

2 See, from the huge literature: Nochlin 1971; Boime 1971; Boime 1980; Herbert 1988; Clark 1973; Clark 1987; Clark 1989; Wagner 1986; Green 1990; Orwicz (ed.) 1994. Later collections from the period include: Duncan 1993; Orton & Pollock 1996; Rifkin 2016. The Open University courses 'A315: Modern Art and Modernism' (1982) and 'A316: Modern Art: Practices and Debates' (1993) presented influential syntheses in writing and broadcasts. Writing on the French Revolution provided the other significant thread. See: Herbert 1972; Crow 1975; Crow 1985; Michel and Sahut 1988.

3 Pollock 1988; Garb 1993; Solomon-Godeau 1986. See also the essays collected in Broude and Gerrard (eds.) 1992.

and arcades to the workers' city;⁴ others began to attend to less-prominent images. The debate has long been atrophied. Who now attends to 'peasant painting' or the edges of the city? Who cares about flâneurs or ragpickers? Who bothers with popular prints or revolutionary fêtes? A few specialists continue to plough these furrows, but the young and ambitious have moved on to newer pastures: primarily, the American art of the 1960s and 1970s and/or the 'Global Contemporary', both probably market reflexes. The essays collected in *The Conspiracy of Modern Art* make a significant contribution to reinvigorating a field of debate. Their author asks us to turn back and reconsider the settled story of modern art and modernity.

Between 1974 and 1978, under the dictatorship, Martins held positions in mainstream newspapers and TV channels, including TV Globo and TV Bandeirantes. Journalism turned out to be a short-lived career, involving as much censorship as actual publication, as many sackings as stories. Even leaving aside military dictatorship, Martins is too polemical a thinker, his imagination always preoccupied with violence, to fit in with the 'flat earth news'. Next, he tried his hand at filmmaking, studying in Paris and making a short film, but fell into teaching media at the Catholic University of São Paulo. In 1994 Martins began a PhD at the University of São Paulo, which went through several incarnations – initially conceived as a study of Italian aesthetics from phenomenology to semiotics, it temporarily morphed into a thesis on Walter Benjamin, before completion in 2000 as *The Fabrication of Painting: From Manet to Rothko*. From 1995 he worked at the University of Campinas (UNICAMP), until the end of 2002 when he was appointed at the USP in the Department of Art History. Martins has long been a political activist: his radical beginning was in the student movement (a sort of Christian left-cum-Maoism). When this trend joined the Partido dos Trabalhadores (PT) he went with them, occupying positions in the Party's international information office and briefly working with the landless workers' movement (MST). He resigned from the PT in the later 1990s, witnessing its increasing openness to big business. His anger with what the Party became now knows no bounds and he is currently a member of the main far-left split from the PT, the Partido Socialista dos Trabalhadores Unificados (PSTU).

The essays that comprise this volume began to appear from 2004 and have their origins in the peculiar moment of the 1990s. For the English-speaking audience the context is decidedly unfamiliar: a thriving Brazilian scene of young artists coincided with the emergence of a strong art market and the

4 Nesbit 1992.

belated reception of Clement Greenberg's formalist account of painting.⁵ There is nothing unusual about a vibrant art scene and dynamic speculation, the same happened in London as a consequence of the financial Big Bang. What is definitely unusual for us is to find Greenberg in this mix! Post-modernism and French theory were mobilised to do the intellectual heavy lifting in the UK and Greenberg was treated as a 'dead dog'. The contrast shows us that there was nothing inevitable in the conjuncture and formalism remains a strong current in Brazil (often reheated through the encounter with certain currents in *October*). Martins' essays partake in a forceful polemic against this artistic formalism and, outside of his specific context, this engagement can seem jarring, as if tilting at windmills or fighting with shades – the battle was fought in Anglophone art history during the 1970s and 1980s, even if there is now a neo-formalist revival. This is one of those little temporal dislocations in intellectual history.

If the criticism of the formalist interpretation of art appears belated, or at least displaced, other dimensions of these essays are strikingly fresh. Martins brings a new interpretative approach to familiar artworks. His art history is markedly canonical; the essays collected here focus on David, Manet, Monet, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Constructivism (Tarabukin) and Abstract Expressionism (Pollock and Rothko). His critical resources are also common enough: Baudelaire, Marx, Freud, Trotsky and Benjamin. Even the appearance in this list of Leon Trotsky is not too startling; he figures in the studies of the early Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg, Mario Pedrosa and others, though, with the exception of the latter, this is probably not the Trotsky of uneven and combined development and permanent revolution.⁶ If there is an unexpected presence in these texts it is that of Giulio Carlo Argan, Art Historian, keeper of antiquities in Rome and member of the PCI.⁷ Argan wrote studies of art, particularly Renaissance and Baroque art, which focused on the labour process and especially the division between mental and manual labour, always viewed from the perspective of their transformation in modern art. (In interesting ways, Martins is an

5 Greenberg's essays are published by Chicago University Press in 4 volumes. See in particular: 'American Type Painting' in Greenberg Vol. 3, 1993 and 'Modernist Painting' and other essays in Greenberg, Vol. 4, 1993; Fried's early criticism is collected in Fried 1998.

6 Greenberg 1986; Rosenberg 1960; Pedrosa 2015. For the debates on this critical literature see: Guilbaut 1983; Franscina (ed.) 1985; Pollock and Orton 1996; and Orton 1996b. For uneven and combined development the core statements are: Trotsky 1969; Trotsky 1967; and Trotsky 1979. Basic further reading includes: Novack 1966; Löwy 1981; and Davidson 2012.

7 Of the dozens of books and catalogues by Argan very few are available in English: Argan 1983d; Argan 1989; Argan and Contardi 1993. See also the very important essay Argan 1946.

Arganist, or is it an Argonaut?) For instance, Martins draws his notion of 'realism' from Argan. This is a term that appears as a progressive sign throughout these essays, so it is worth saying that realism is conceived here in a flexible fashion. In the accounts of the Left, realism often appears as a representational mode: a style of painting that depicts workers' struggles, or the life of the 'people' in recognisable terms – spatial arrangement, modelling, scale and form, etc. Here, in contrast, realism is the register of art's reflexivity; its ability to internalise the grounding conditions of capitalist violence and revolution as individual sensation and working method. Realism here is a process of 'aesthetic formalisation'. In this manner, Martins pays a great deal of attention to rapidity of brushwork and 'finish'. As an account of realism it is much closer to Brecht and Benjamin than boy-meets-tractor painting. Some of Argan's individual judgements and his terms of reference now seem somewhat dated, particularly the value-laden conception of the 'Classical', but there is no doubt that his innovative argument deserves real attention. We need modern translations of his most important studies. These ideas are discussed in detail in Chapter 11, 'Argan Seminar, Art, Value and Work'. The chapter is a clear presentation of Argan's approach, which should be read with care in order to separate out what is significant for this argument and what is of mere period concern.

If the artworks and resources are familiar, so is the syncopated time of revolution 1789/1830/1848/1871/1917; the punctuated temporality of the barricades has regularly featured as the backdrop to the emergence of modern art.⁸ Yet from these familiar components a very different conception of modernity and modern art come into view and they enable a startling labour of *ekphrasis*. One central task of art writing is describing pictures (or artworks) in a manner that is attentive, credible and, in Greenberg's terms, 'relevant'. All such descriptions are debatable, but many in this book are compelling and even when the issues or artworks are familiar they contribute to developing another vocabulary for art.

While Martins is familiar with the social history of art, these essays are conceived in a different mode. They are not so much historical explanations of artworks, rather Martins thinks with his objects. While historical materials are mobilised, he writes polemical and theoretical essays exploring the constitution of capitalist modernisation and the ways that some modern artists stood in the way of, or out against, 'progress'. In this sense, Martins' essays are ways of thinking about our current impasse. In this task, his style plays an important role. In this edition we have tried to retain his particular voice, cast somewhere

8 Wood 2004.

between declamation and interrogation, but in the interest of clarity for English readers we have often felt it necessary to break down his long and complicated Portuguese sentences. Inevitably, something of his original elocutionary force has been lost in the process.

There are two fundamental claims in this book, which swirl and cross in the presence of modernist paintings. The first is the idea that the core of modernity is not to be found in consumption or *flânerie*, but the 'so-called primitive accumulation' (accumulation by dispossession); uneven and combined development; proletarianisation (the transformation of the labour process and deskilling); Regicide, Thermidor and Bonapartism. In Martins' hands, French painting is constituted through *Gewalt*.⁹ The form this art takes is forged in the process of political violence; it emerges out of the struggle between the revolutionary democracy and the dictatorship(s) of capital. This is one reason that Baudelaire continues to echo as founding voice through these essays: Baudelaire, Satanist and champion of negativity, haunts the modern. The key term that emerges for thinking about modern painting as a Thermidorian condition is not difference, with its sense of motility, but stasis and its synonyms: petrification or suspension, or some other sedimented and frozen time.

The second central theme is that of painting as changing labour-form that registers transformations in the capitalist organisation of work. This is the Arganist strand in Martins' project. The consolidation of capitalism – the Thermidorian defeat of the popular rabble; Haussmanisation (unusually, described in particularly violent terms); the crushing of the Commune; McCarthyism and a new Imperialism – destroyed old conditions of labour, undermining independent craft workers and installing standardised factory work. The result was a new regime of work based on the incessant repetition and serialisation (which Martins sometimes calls 'patterning'), fragmentation and divided proletarians. This theme is centrally developed in Chapter 9: 'Painting as labour-form', in which Martins offers a detailed interpretation of some painting practices that responded to, or recoded, this transformation. The work of some artists (Manet, Cézanne, Van Gogh, the cubists) is said to contrast living, sentient labour to this process of abstraction. In this sense, he argues that the term 'avant-garde' must be reserved for those rare moments when art and revolution genuinely fuse. Nonetheless, Martins insists that the best of modern art is anti-capitalist in impulse, encoding or translating individual sensation, and value-laden work against regimentation. In the hands of a few exceptional painters, art stands aside from *Gewalt*, whether as shadow or wish-image.

9 Balibar 2009; Tomba 2009; Basso 2009.

Martins pursues this trajectory through Cubism to Pollock and Rothko, who against received wisdom he reads as the last painters (in the Hegelian sense), compelled to cancel subjectivity and expression, veiling or spreading out the hand-made mark. Deprived of form or subject at what Victor Serge called 'the midnight of the century' and faced with a plenitude of materials, they confronted the world of the culture industry in the only way left open to the romantic, individual antagonists of one-dimensional life. Far from the avatars of liberal freedom and subjective expressivity, he argues they cancelled or negated any traces of the self. Thereafter, in the condition he characterises as 'global civil war', the individual response is said to be futile and incapable of generating a convincing art. One way to account for Martins' intervention is to see it as a post-humanist restatement of the once powerful anthropological strand in Marxism that claimed art is a form of non-alienated labour, attuned to historic work rhythms.¹⁰ Martins' essays are much more negative in impetus and simultaneously more attentive to individual works and practices than the older positions, but his Marx-Benjamin-Argan line may be one of the best ways of salvaging the kernel of truth from the argument.

While the history of 'real subsumption' Martins presents is open to debate, the presumption allows him to generate an account of modern art as labour process against capital. In Chapter 9, the suppression of the Commune and attendant slaughter are presented as the primal scene of French capitalism, eradicating craftwork, forcibly tearing apart home and workshop, and instigating the new labour regime to which subsequent modern artists responded. A criticism might be that only a weak dialectic is established between painting as response to *Gewalt* and as labour-form. A violent event or episode is presented as point of origin, but then art appears as shadow play or afterglow. In any case, there is plenty to consider. A good way to review this debate is with the programmatic thesis presented in Chapter 12 and Chapter 13. Indeed, the reader might do well to begin with these final chapters, subtitled respectively 'Entries for Combat' and 'Lessons and Modes of Use', which summarise many of the key themes from *The Conspiracy of Modern Art*.

Even when Martins' focuses on well-known pictures by David or Manet, familiar texts by Baudelaire and Benjamin, or the tale of Haussmannisation to which we have become accustomed, a different story and a series of novel concepts emerge. Reading the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Martins attends to representation, but not to repetition and drama, though both are present. Instead he returns to the main lines of Marx's text: the coup d'état, the

10 For example: West 1937; Thompson 1945; Caudwell 1977; Fischer 2010.

suspension of class struggle, and the dictatorship of the little Napoleon. From *The Civil War in France*, he takes not the premonition of the future democratic power of a workers' republic, but the rabid slaughter of the 'Bloody Week'. While their work develops in very different directions, this emphasis parallels Adrian Rifkin's writings on the culture of the Commune.¹¹ In attending to Freud, Martins reads the unfashionable *The Future of an Illusion*, *Totem and Taboo* and *Civilisation and its Discontents*, rather than *Three Essays on Sexuality*.¹² What these emphases have in common is attention to the state-form, to power, repression and looking away. Martins' account of modern art is a story of class dictatorship and the ideological and psychic mechanisms that allow subjects not to recognise class domination. In the process, fetishism (or totemism) is mobilised in novel ways.

If Tatlin working away in war encircled Moscow and creating constructivism comes to mind, it would be silly to claim that São Paulo is intellectually and culturally cut off. How could one be isolated in a city that, depending on who is doing the estimate, contains something like 20,000,000 inhabitants? I suppose some have tried to argue that Marxism and the politics of class no longer have a basis in this society, but it is hard to take such ideas seriously in the world's most unequal society. São Paulo is a bigger luxury market than Switzerland (executive cars, jewellery, watches and designer clothes) yet mass poverty abounds. In the North-East of Brazil instances of slavery (debt peonage) still prevail; and despite their new rights, the situation of indigenous people is perilous. The PT governments drew millions of Brazilians out of absolute poverty with the *bolsa família* (about 70 *Reais* per person, per month, in so far as they receive it), but the line of 'absolute poverty' is drawn under 2\$ a day. The Brazilian miracle has stalled and the economy is returning to primary export production. The idea of catch-up and state formation has given way to discussions of re-peripheralisation and 'deformation'.¹³ Political violence is a fact of life in such a society. São Paulo is the condenser for all of this. As I write, there are daily strikes across the city and USP has just emerged from months of occupation, following the bureaucratic coup that toppled Dilma Rousseff and the PT. Martins acted as co-ordinator for the Workers' University that operated in its stead to defend the public character of the University. In the Brazilian megalopolis other concerns come to the fore. In Martins' hands the view from São Paulo proves a better perspective to consider nineteenth-century Paris and French

11 Rifkin 2016.

12 Freud 1991a; Freud 1990; Freud 1991b; and Freud 1991c.

13 Martins is involved with the DESFORMAS research group and the Workers' University at USP.

modernism than London or New York or California; certainly a better vantage point than contemporary Paris. From inside this political vortex Martins sees modern art in a very different light.

The brilliance of these essays involves taking the Brazilian debate on state formation (and deformation) as the ground for reimagining cultural form. Martins is an anti-formalist, but he confronts the challenge of formal criticism to attend to the constitution of pictures. Sometimes, the descriptive terms seem to be inherited from the older tradition of a John Rewald or a Theodor Reff, though one can find strong traces of Michael Fried's work in these essays, particularly Fried's account of 'facingness' or frontality in Manet.¹⁴ Yet form is also understood here in terms of what Roberto Schwarz calls 'objective form' or Adorno described as 'sedimented content'; that is to say, form is the historical process as it is laid down in composition or brushwork.¹⁵ Rather than studying bourgeois thematics – showing off at the opera; a day at the races or a fashionable café; sauntering on the lookout for sex – Martins considers the appearance of modernist artworks as the site of class struggle. The 'shock' which Simmel and Benjamin spoke of is reinterpreted, not as an over-stimulus of the nerves, but as the body blows of primary accumulation and the intense violence of coup and dictatorship, of massacre and 'stabilisation'. In a brilliant essay on J-L. David's drawing for the large painting *The Oath of the Tennis Court* – representing the collective vow of republican deputies to remain together until they forged a new constitution – the arrangement of the revolutionary figures stages the hemicycle of the republican assembly (in contrast to the form of the British parliament). The picture is incomplete because the radicalisation of the revolutionary process in 1792 and the concomitant split between Girondins and Jacobins left behind the unity it embodied. Martins emphasises instantaneous *élan* in David's works of the revolutionary period – the portraits of the martyrs Marat and the young Bara or *The Oath of the Tennis Court*. Whereas the standard interpretation suggests that these pictures are unfinished, Martins insists that this seemingly spontaneous brushwork was what David intended. They are not 'incomplete' or abandoned, but definite and deliberate. The point, I think, is to indicate a formal equivalent, a trace of labour, for the revolutionary instant; one that is always revisable and incomplete, because it accepts the dynamics of change that will necessarily leave it remaindered. 'Preliminary' or 'unfinished' in the history of academic art traditionally suggests a minor study in preparation for the finished, wrought or polished masterpiece. Unfinished

14 Rewald 1961; Reff 1977; Fried 1996.

15 Schwarz 2012; Adorno 2002, p. 144.

works tend to occupy a marginal place in the histories of art and have often been shunted off to provincial collections or consigned to storage rooms. These are all temporal categories and they carry political inflections. Martins wants to reverse these typical priorities – not just as some modernist or formalist critics have done in emphasising the sketch as expressive counterweight to Academic comportment – rather, he prioritises ‘unfinished’, rough or dynamic surfaces as equivalents to a revolutionary time, conceived as processual and dynamic. The unfinished or incomplete is the permanent condition of revolutionary process and its antithesis is the freezing over of class struggle achieved by Bonapartism in Paris or Moscow or São Paulo. In a term drawn from Baudelaire, he calls these impermanent surfaces ‘voluptuous’.

Martins’ traces the shift from David, voluptuary of revolutionary democracy, to the glacial, cold painter of Bonapartism; in the transformation, the rapid touch of the earlier works freezes over.¹⁶ Martins proposes to explore ‘a scheme consisting in the distinction between two types of images created by David between 1791 and 1812: *voluptuous* and *totemic* images.’¹⁷ These totemic images are glacial – cold and glassy, their surface is like ice. Yet the coup internalises both regicide and the destruction of the revolutionary republic, while unleashing capitalist property relations. Having made the point, Martins adds nuance to his claim. David’s painting of the Emperor – the key example here is *Bonaparte Crossing the Saint-Bernard Pass* of 1800–1 – instantiates the same ambivalence between revolutionary dynamism and the new order of capital. In the essay ‘Eighteenth Brumaire, the Fabrication of a Totem: Freud, David and Bonapartism’, Freud’s image-idea of the totem (or fetish-form) is employed to hold in tension the revolution and its negation. The totem-painting, we might say, involves a time in abeyance. For the author, the traces of voluptuousness can still be seen in these works attesting to the unfinished revolution in permanence. This is French painting, read through Trotsky, by way of Freud and Benjamin, as affirmation of revolutionary time and against the glacial freeze. Furnace-painting, the ‘work of combustion’,¹⁸ is set against an ideological ice-age.

The majority of studies in this volume deal not with revolutionary voluptuousness, but its suspension. Martins takes that decisive moment in civil war, the Bloody Week that finished off the Communards, as a pivotal moment in creating the new conditions for capital accumulation based on reorganisation

16 For an excellent account of the dialectics of freeze and flow, see Leslie 2016.

17 See Chapter 4, ‘Eighteenth Brumaire, the Fabrication of a Totem: Freud, David and Bonapartism’.

18 Marx 1978, p. 208.

of the division of labour that destroyed craft subjectivity. Thus the massacre of capital's antagonists and the destruction of a labour-form became constitutive for modern painting in Manet, Cézanne and Van Gogh – 'too fast or too slow – in any case, always fragmented – from then on painting would no longer have the pace and integrity of the metabolic union of intellectual and physical action'.¹⁹ This emphasis on the division between mental and manual labour and productive technique is drawn from Argan's work, principally his book on Baroque art.²⁰ The singularity of the brushstroke in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism is here taken in contrast to abstract labour. However, 'Opticality, organicity and totality' in the impressionist artwork appear as false sublations. In this sense, Martins is a critic of the 'aesthetic ideology', resisting the illusions or compensations of wholeness and immediacy.²¹ Sensation carries its empiricist baggage, but here it appears as response to the regimentation of subjectivity and deskilling of craft. It is a powerful aspect of these essays that, while their author recognises that sensation could be mobilised as a counterfoil to capitalist dictatorship, his descriptions never allow 'little sensations' to congeal into a new organic ideology. The painting of sensation remained fragmentary, a broken echo of the workshop. Marxist art history has had much to say about commodification, but class and particularly production have been much less present. Martins goes some way to correcting this glaring imbalance.

While I have my doubts about Martin's interpretation of Richard Shiff's important study of Cézanne, he presents a finely textured description of the painter's working method, imbued with contradictions and contrasts, to set him aside from the aesthetic ideology:

In making explicit the evidently discontinuous status of the manufactured object, Cézanne's painting overthrew the *a priori* value distinction between the mythical uniqueness of the work of art, as a paradigmatic result of a unique artisanal mastery, and the current productive work, realised abstractly and in a standardised and partial way.²²

19 Chapter 9 in this volume.

20 Argan 1989.

21 De Man 1986; De Man 1996, Eagleton 1990, Clark 1999b. Unfortunately, the outstanding essay by Fred Orton – 'Cézanne/Medan/De Man' – remains unpublished. For a presentation of this argument see Day 2010.

22 Chapter 9 in this volume. Shiff 1986. My sense is that Shiff sees Cézanne as much more in line with Symbolism.

With Formalism and Symbolism, Cézanne's 'paintbrush as method' was pacified and reinterpreted in terms of Neoplatonism, mysticism, harmony and, for some, 'order'. Yet nothing is continuous, fixed, stable or permanent in the canvases of Cézanne – we have another instance of fluidity against the freeze of counter-revolution. Martins calls this 'process-painting': it is a moment when living labour – 'form-giving fire'²³ – stands in opposition to 'division and quantification', in other words, from abstract labour separated from sensation. I won't follow through the details of Martins' description of Van Gogh's 'labour painting', which entails a further unfolding of these themes. The essay on Tarabukin and Constructivism has the feel of an occasional essay introducing these matters to Brazilian readers, but it too focuses on the reordering of work and the decline of craft: 'From Easel to Machine'; art into production; construction vs. composition, the engineers of a new life, fabrication, and so forth. In all his case studies, this detailed and innovative reading of art and the labour process is founded on moments of social upheaval and violence: in the French Revolution and its suspension; the grisly slaughter of the Communards and the promise of the October Revolution and the Stalinist counter-revolution.

Even when the familiar story of commodification makes its appearance in this book – in essays on Manet's portraits and *Olympia* – that process is described with much more vehemence than we usually encounter in the mainstream accounts of modernity. Commodification is the effect of violent dispossession and its primary object is labour and not the glittering display of wares. Rightly, it is presented as an assault on the body and *Olympia* is its *leitmotif*. Martins rewrites the known stories, reanimating the corpse. The feminised worker's body, he claims, is de-defined, vague, with organs as plugs. It is not clear if these 'plugs' are imagined to be stoppers or fittings for connection to machine-sockets. Either way, this is *Olympia* as she has never been presented before and, in the process, Bakhtin's vision of the utopian body, or the voluptuous body of revolution, is horribly transfigured or perhaps disfigured.²⁴ Capitalism seals the body, isolates it and jams it into the circuits of production or exchange. Shock here is electrocution.

'Facingness' in Manet's portraits *Olympia* and *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* is recast by Martins as the proximate space of economic transaction or negotiation.²⁵ This is an excellent suggestion. Manet presents 'circulating beings' of the 'duct city'. So if the 'whore' is a figure for the worker, as Benjamin argued, in

23 Marx 1973, p. 361. For a recent study of these themes see Gulli 2005.

24 Bakhtin 1984.

25 For the range of interpretations see Collins (ed.) 1996.

painting this is primarily because of the private encounter, which reveals the labour contract to be one of inequality and subordination and feminisation to be a deleterious process.²⁶

Martins' knowledge of English-language literature on modern art is limited and these essays do suffer from a lack of familiarity with some significant studies.²⁷ Of course, linguistic barriers prove real limitations and very few English-speaking art historians can claim Portuguese (in Martins' case, French, Italian and Spanish too). My point is simply that Martins' attention was focused on French art at a time when the best work was being produced elsewhere.²⁸ In 1983 Perry Anderson claimed 'Paris today is the capital of European intellectual reaction', and art historians seem intent on corroborating his claim.²⁹ Draped in past glories, they simply ignored non-national scholarship and turned away from theory.³⁰ During this period Anglophone art history was richer than this, with formalism or neo-formalism merely one current. In this misprision we encounter the unevenness of our cultural formations: the operations of centre-periphery and the over-determinations of language groups. Nevertheless, the perspective from inside primitive accumulation, state formation and dictatorship, crossed with a labour-process analysis, generates an invaluable way of seeing again.³¹

26 Benjamin 1999; Buck-Morss 1986.

27 Paul Smith's work on sensation in Impressionism, Seurat and Cézanne immediately springs to mind (Smith 1996; Smith 1997). The writing on the culture of the Commune by Kristin Ross and Adrian Rifkin are an absence (Ross 1988; Ross 2015; Rifkin 2016). Familiarity with feminist responses to T.J. Clark would have helped – it is, I think, a problem that the beholder is described as 'he' in these essays (Pollock 1988; Garb 1987; Garb 1993; Solomon-Godeau 1986; Armstrong 2002; Lipton 1992). It would also have been productive to engage the debate on gender and neo-classicism (among others: Duncan 1993; Solomon-Godeau 1997; Potts 2000; Padiyar 2007; Siegfried 2009). Fred Orton's work on American painting – particularly 'Footnote One' – would have added something (Orton 1996b). It isn't clear that Martins has read Clark's essays on Abstract Expressionism, despite many shared themes and concerns. (See Chapters 6 and 7 in Clark 1999c).

28 Aside from structuralist and neo-structuralist writing, see: Melot 1975; Melot 1981; Melot 1996; Melot 2007; Melot 2008; Michel and Sahut 1988; Michel 1992; Michel 2000; and Michel 2001.

29 Anderson 1983, p. 32; Bensaïd 2011.

30 For an example see the exhibition catalogue to the 2007 Courbet exhibition at the Grande Palais. Font-Réaulx et al 2007.

31 It is amazing how many accounts of culture in nineteenth-century Europe seem unaware that they are dealing with dictatorships of the bourgeoisie, effective police states, in which censorship was the framing condition for writing or picture-making. Accounts that derive

If writing in Portuguese while engaging with French art-historical scholarship has drawbacks, it also has distinct advantages, allowing the author to jump over what has recently become the normal science of the Anglophone discipline: social history of non-canonical objects + Foucault + depoliticised versions of feminism + multiculturalism. This is modern art for a metropolitan middle-class in the making; it is left-leaning and open to gender, sexuality and multiculturalism, while avoiding such impolite topics as capitalist domination and imperialism. Martins is able to skip this common sense and produce polemical and startling interpretations of art that speak to a new generation of thinkers formed by protests against the institutions of neoliberal governance. These essays are likely to resonate with the left structure of feeling shaped by war in the Middle East, 2008 and 'austerity', and the associated upsurge in ideas drawn from Workerism, post-Althusserian thought, council communism, or the Marxist accounts of Benjamin. His Francophone focus has given him a mode of address that chimes with the moment: this is the declarative and assertive voice of the French academy, but injected with an intransigent Marxism focused on the violence of the 'so-called primitive accumulation', which the Professors have forgotten. The uneven time of scholarship allows a writer from the 'semi-periphery' to become remarkably contemporary. Martins' essays are often fragmentary – resembling Benjamin's *Paris – The Capital of the Nineteenth Century* – and the lapidary subtitles alone offer radically new ways of thinking about a familiar history: 'Glaciation and business'; 'Totem canvas', 'Spark', 'Duct-city', 'Circulation beings' and so forth. They are modernist in form. These essays demonstrate that the resources of classical Marxism (plus Benjamin) are still capable of illumination when employed creatively. In fact, at their best, these essays have the odd ring of the accounts of modern art that Daniel Bensaïd might have written, had he attended to the subject. Leaps! Leaps! Leaps!

from Adorno and the idea of a shattered once-autonomous personality are particularly guilty, despite the fact that he saw fascism in every nook-and-cranny.

The Conspiracy of Modern Art

Unfinished

Baudelaire cites the speed, and even instantaneity, of execution as an essential characteristic of 'modern art'. Thus, we need not wait for Freud and his valorisation of speech fragments to consider the decisive content of one of Baudelaire's notes.

In the 'Salon of 1845', when referring to Corot's landscapes, the writer values the triumph of a single brushstroke and the 'accomplished' (as unfinished) in opposition to the 'finished'.¹

Finally, in *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863), Baudelaire refers to the 'fire, an intoxication of pencil, brush, almost amounting to frenzy' – a method through which the 'great artists ... appropriate the orders of the spirit' so they 'may never be perverted by the hesitations of the hand'. Baudelaire concludes: 'ideal execution' would be such that it would 'become unconscious, as *fluid* as is digestion for a healthy man after dinner'.²

Omitted

In this sense, let us analyse from Baudelaire's notes one small piece of paper with pencil-scribbled notes, omitted in the first posthumous edition of the author.³

1 'The value of a well-placed and essential spiritual brush stroke is enormous'. See Baudelaire 2002a, p. 390.

2 Baudelaire's emphasis. The preceding excerpt describes the facture of a paradigmatic modern artist: 'In the execution ... two things are revealed: one, an application of the resurrecting memory ... another, a fire, an intoxication of pencil, brush, almost amounting to frenzy. It is the fear of not doing something quickly enough, of letting the phantom escape before the synthesis is extracted and fixed; this is the terrible fear that takes hold of all great artists and that makes them desire so ardently to appropriate all forms of expression, so the orders of the spirit will never be altered by the hesitations of the hand; so that finally the execution, the ideal execution, also becomes unconscious, as *fluid* as is digestion for a healthy man after dinner' (Baudelaire's emphasis). See Baudelaire 2002n, p. 699.

3 The text was ignored in favour of another, found beside it, and which – although not com-

What is so interesting about these rushed notes? Let us consider an excerpt:

The birthplace of Painting is the Temple. It derives from Sanctity. The modern temple and the modern Sanctity are the Revolution. Thus *let us create the Temple of the Revolution* and the Painting of the Revolution. This means that the modern Pantheon will contain *the history of humanity*.

Pan must kill God. Pan is the people.

Chimerical aesthetics, that is, *a posteriori*, individual, artificial, a substitute for an aesthetics that is involuntary, spontaneous, fatal, vital, and of the people.⁴

Unresolved Problem

Before confronting the enigmatic web of references and the surprising tone of this text, let us consider its relevance. By referring to the painting of the Revolution and to the temple that will house the painting of the history of humanity born of the parricide of God by the people, Baudelaire dives headlong into the

plete – was considered definite and clear. Under the posthumous title of ‘Philosophical Art’, this last text was published in the anthology *Art Romantique* (1868), edited by Asselineau and Banville (see Baudelaire 2002i). The notes, scribbled in pencil and excluded, were published under the secondary title of ‘Various notes on Philosophical Art’, by Jacques Crépet in 1925 (see Baudelaire 2002j). Apud Pichois 2002, pp. 1377, 1381.

- 4 (*‘La peinture est née dans le Temple. Elle dérive de la Sainteté. Le Temple moderne, la Sainteté moderne, c’est la Révolution. Donc faisons le Temple de la Révolution, et la peinture de la Révolution. C’est à dire que le Panthéon moderne contiendra l’histoire de l’humanité./ Pan doit tuer Dieu. Pan, c’est le peuple./ Esthétique chimérique, c’est à dire a posteriori, individuelle, artificielle, substituée à l’esthétique involontaire, spontanée, fatale, vitale, du peuple’*). See Baudelaire 2002j, p. 606. Note that Baudelaire distinguished the specificity of the point of view of the commoner, which he appreciated. Thus, in the note ‘Common sense of the people’, in the first issue of *Le Salut Public*, 27 February 1848, he affirmed: ‘There are men full of total clichés ... and of epithets as hollow as their heads. – Mr. Odilon Barrot, for instance./ When someone talks about 89, these people tell you, it was Voltaire who started the Revolution; or it was Rousseau who started the Revolution; or it was Beaumarchais who started the Revolution./ Imbeciles! Fools! Idiots twice!/ Michelet said: “The Revolution of 1789 was made by the people.” Michelet was right about that./ The people do not love intellectuals! And he would exchange all Voltaires and Beaumarchais in the world for old trousers./ Which proves, in the Tuileries no sculptures or paintings were looted except for the image of the former king and Bugeaud [a marshal]; a single bust was thrown out of the windows! ... Voltaire’s bust’. See Baudelaire 2002d, pp. 1031–1032. On Baudelaire’s empathy for the plebeian perspective, see also Baudelaire 2002q, pp. 360–363.

issue of *art engagé* and *didactic art*.⁵ This issue emerged in the French Revolution, only to be suffocated in the new environment after the Thermidorian Coup. But it would subsequently reappear as one of 'modern art's' most heated topics of debate over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

To mention an example contrary to Baudelaire, let us recall that in the essay 'Commitment' (1962), in defence of 'autonomous form',⁶ Adorno enters into open conflict on the matter with both Sartre and Brecht.

In short, despite Baudelaire's fragment being written very quickly, it aspired to a didactic and lasting art, which would be located in a temple. Moreover, it is not the only paradox or unfulfilled desire which is presented in this case. If we proceed to investigate the wider process of which these notes were part, we will find other unfinished propositions and much indeterminacy. However, the significant and numerous fragments demand interpretation and a hypothesis.

Antinomy

Since his first writings of 1845, Baudelaire's attention was drawn to what he called 'modern art'. Indeed, he coined the term very early on and was the first to theorise the phenomenon. The notes form part of the last phase of his systematic reflection on the issue.⁷

During the last nine years of his life, until he suffered a collapse in 1866, Baudelaire repeatedly mentioned texts on the topic in his letters. Today we usually take *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863) as the corollary or the finished expression of Baudelaire's thinking about 'modern art'. In fact this process remained unfinished.

The notes in question, as well as the text about 'philosophic art' or 'didactic art',⁸ and other similar texts from that period, suggest that *The Painter of Mod-*

5 An example of didactic exhortation in Baudelaire's poetry is the end of the poem 'Abel et Caïn', a work of youth but under the author's gaze until 1857: 'Race of Cain, rise to the sky/ And throw God onto the earth' [*Race de Caïn, au ciel monte,/ Et sur la terre jette Dieu!*]. See Baudelaire 2002f, p. 123. For an interpretation of the poem as an example of exhortation to social war or criticism of the ideal of fraternity, see Oehler 1999, pp. 76–83.

6 See Adorno 2009, pp. 285–306.

7 In his Journal, Delacroix used the expression 'modern art', but in a colloquial and informal way. Baudelaire was the first who tried to relate, fix, and systematise that notion. For one of the first enthusiastic discussions of the topic, see Baudelaire 2002b, pp. 408–410. Published in *Le Corsaire-Satan*, on 21 January 1846 (53 years after the execution of Louis XVI).

8 The notes in question, written in pencil, are topped by two lines that seem like a title and

ern Life was part of a process of reflection about ‘modern art’, yet without exhausting or concluding the subject. In this essay, Baudelaire mainly developed the perspective of sensation in art, as we know. On the other hand, the notes under consideration here outline the perspective of *didactic art*, and the correlated function of the representation of history, destined for the ‘Temple of the Revolution’, the ‘Modern Pantheon’.

In other words, the underlying problem is to create a specific system of ‘modern art’ that includes a combination of the power of improvisation linked to sensation, that is, a mixture of science and naïvety – which Baudelaire saw in Delacroix, as early as the ‘Salon of 1846’⁹ – and its apparent opposite: historical narrative with didactic content.

Daumier’s lithograph *Rue Transnonain, on 15 April 1834* (1834) constituted a striking paradigm of this later mode. But since it was a newspaper work, and not a painting, it left the problem somewhat unresolved. In painting, Baudelaire found the combination of improvisation and history lesson initially presented in *The Death of Marat* (1793), by Jacques-Louis David; it was immediately hailed by the young critic, aged 24, as the first ‘masterpiece’ of ‘modern art’.¹⁰

a sub-title, written in a different way from the sentences below them, like a file or entry. They are, respectively, ‘Didactic painting’ and ‘Note about Chenavard’s utopia’. The first dates from 27 April 1857 and refers to the work process to which the notes belong, under the title of ‘Argumentative painters [*Peintres raisonnateurs*]’ – echoing Rousseau [our argumentative century (*notre siècle raisonneur*)]? The second, under ‘Philosopher painters [*Peintres philosophes*]’, from January–February 1858, adds: ‘the painters who subordinate art to reasoning’. The last reference is in a note from 6 February 1866 to the publisher Hippolyte Garnier (1816–1911): ‘Didactic Art, the schools of Germany and Lyons [*L’Art didactique, écoles allemande et lyonnaise*]’. See Pichois 2002, pp. 1377–1378.

9 There are two, if not more, early examples of praise for improvisation in the ‘Salon of 1846’ with regard to the paradigmatic painting of Delacroix: ‘So slow, serious, and conscientious is the conception of the great artist, as is fast its execution’; and ‘Delacroix is, like all great masters, an admirable combination of science, – that is, a complete painter, – and naïvety, that is, a complete man’. See Baudelaire 2002c, pp. 433, 435. In reality, the praise of fast and spontaneous execution is a recurrent theme in the writings of Baudelaire and can be found in countless passages and expressions.

10 See Baudelaire 2002b, pp. 408–410. The text, written in 1846, is one of Baudelaire’s first works; however, his conviction about the paradigmatic function and watershed significance of David’s work was striking. He would insist on such critical intuition throughout his work. On the other hand, we can say that the judgement of the novice writer, in January 1846, echoes or unfolds, in a way, Daumier’s lithograph about the massacre of Rue Transnonain (1834), which in turn echoes David’s *The Death of Marat*. See Oehler 1997, pp. 38–39. On David’s *The Death of Marat*, see ‘Marat, by David: photojournalism’, in this volume.

However, what was possible in the exceptional situation of the Great Revolution emerged, in Baudelaire's time, as a paradox or antinomy marked as it was by what Sartre called 'social genocide' (the slaughter with which the bourgeoisie crushed the uprising of June 1848).¹¹

Dialectical System

Our central aim in examining Baudelaire's notes is to prove that, when facing the contradiction between the 'art of sensation' (a 'suggestive magic which contains ... the external world and the artist himself') – and 'didactic art' ('which has the pretension to teach history, morality, and philosophy'),¹² he opted to outline a dialectical system for a modern *epic* art, through the synthesis of improvisation and history lesson.

Paul Chenavard, the painter who, after the revolution of February 1848, proposed a painting of the history of humanity for the Pantheon, is the main topic of the text on 'philosophic painting'. He plays the role of a temporary pillar in the construction of Baudelaire's system. Chenavard was a close friend of Delacroix. In 'The work and life of Delacroix', an essay Baudelaire published a few days before *The Painter of Modern Life*,¹³ Chenavard is mentioned as the pictorial antithesis of Delacroix, but also as his favourite interlocutor. With him, Delacroix 'took refuge in immense conversations'; and it was also Chenavard whom Delacroix called 'to shake hands with in the last hours of his life'.¹⁴

11 See Sartre 1988. Over the course of three nights, (24, 25, and 26 June 1848), 15,000 prisoners were taken from the holds of the Tuileries Garden, into which they had been crammed, to be executed in cold blood. On the massacre, see Marx and Engels 2006, pp. 519–681; Oehler 1999.

12 See Baudelaire 2002i, p. 598.

13 Delacroix died on 13 August 1863. *Opinion Nationale* published Baudelaire's text on Delacroix on 2 September, 14 November, and 22 November 1863. The 'Painter of Modern Life' was published soon after: 26 and 29 November and 3 December 1863 in *Figaro*. See Pichois 2002, pp. 1440–1441.

14 See Baudelaire 2002m, pp. 765–766. On 25 November 1863, between publication of the text about Delacroix and a second text about the painting of modern life, Baudelaire wrote about it to Chenavard. See Pichois 2002, vol. II, p. 1441.

Chenavard, According to Baudelaire

Baudelaire's homage to Delacroix reveals not only an aim to emphasise the notorious antithesis of Chenavard's and Delacroix's pictorial modes, but also the writer's intention to indicate a reciprocal relation between them. Both artists nurtured this reciprocity through friendship and constant dialogue, despite producing different expressions in their paintings.

Baudelaire exchanged letters with Chenavard, to whom he dedicated two drawings, and Chenavard also portrayed Baudelaire in a sketch.¹⁵ Chenavard, a reader of Herder, Hegel, Schlegel, and others, affirmed that he painted a 'philosophy of history'.¹⁶ He had proposed for the Pantheon an immense set of panels that would amount to over 900 m², comprising a syncretic and philosophastering history of humanity, which would be to the taste of the philosophical, eclectic, and republican ideals of the men of the Revolution of February 1848. Among the latter, the Freemasons held influence through characters like the minister of the interior of the provisional government, the Freemason Ledru-Rollin, to whom Chenavard proposed his project for mural paintings. The proposal was accepted.

Chenavard's pictorial narrative was presented as 'the march of mankind towards the future through trials and through the alternatives of ruin and rebirth'. The theme of the images would extend from the beginnings of humanity, through Regeneration and 'social Palingenesis', finally reaching a 'Peace Marseillaise'.¹⁷ Certainly Baudelaire, a participant of the June barricades against the February regime,¹⁸ dissented from the pastoral and positivist con-

15 The sketch of a man's head (charcoal, with white-chalk highlights on paper pasted on cardboard, 28 × 17 cm, donated by the artist to the museum of Lyon in 1877), refers to Baudelaire (ca. 1862), according to Sloane. Grunewald follows the attribution. Patry (2000) is reticent about the resemblance. See Sloane 1962; Grunewald 1983; Patry 2000 (includes a reproduction of the picture, cat. 3, p. 33), pp. 32–33. On the other hand, it is certain that Baudelaire wrote dedications and comments to Chenavard on two of Chenavard's drawings: on a portrait of his lover Jeanne Duval, 'Vision Céleste à l'Usage de Paul Chenavard' (Baudelaire, bibliothèque littéraire Jacques Doucet) and on the portrait of a woman, 'Échantillon de *Beauté Antique dédié à Chenavard*' (Baudelaire's emphasis, *ibid.*). See Chaudonneret 2000a (includes reproductions of two drawings of Baudelaire, figs. 121 and 122, p. 120), pp. 115–121.

16 See Grunewald 1977, p. 1.

17 Apud Grunewald 1977, p. 3. See also Chaudonneret (ed.) 2000b.

18 For Gustave Le Vasseur's description of Baudelaire's participation in the barricades of June, see Crepet 1907, p. 82, apud Oehler 2003, pp. 302–303. For intrinsic connections between Baudelaire's general work and the 1848 insurrection, see Oehler 1997; Oehler 1999; Oehler 2004a.

tent of Chenevard's narrative. At the same time, he respected Chenevard's intention to raise painting to a philosophical plane, relying on 'great ideas', in contrast to what he saw as the trinkets and trifles that dominated the art of his time.¹⁹

It can be assumed, however, that Baudelaire needed Chenevard, as a counterpoint to Delacroix's art of sensations, so as to dialectically outline his formative system of 'modern art'. Similarly, Baudelaire required Constantin Guys, the 'painter of modern life', in order to account for aspects of urban life that Balzac had brought into the literary world, but which had not yet been articulated in painting.

To Continue with the Revolution

If Chenevard's painting is the explicit theme of the notes on 'philosophic art', the 'Miscellaneous Notes', in turn, seem to refer to the painting of the First Republic – which, incidentally, had been the theme of Chenevard's early paintings.²⁰

In fact, in the Revolutionary Republic of 1792–1794, David had reconstructed the painting of history to narrate 'regenerated' humanity, as it was called at the time of years I and II. This involved a 'pantheonisation' of the revolutionary martyrs, with David's painting playing a decisive role, and the Revolution had included regicide and dechristianisation – both abhorred by the Thermidorian bourgeoisie and its successors: the Bonapartist bourgeoisie, the one of the post-imperial restoration, the one called *juste-milieu*, and the one of the reign of Louis Philippe. The brief, enigmatic, and semi-encrypted allusions of the 'Miscellaneous Notes', which were rejected by the first publishers, thus probably arose from Baudelaire's sympathy for the values of the pre-Thermidorian First Republic.

19 Baudelaire considered Chenevard an exception to such a state of affairs: 'There is something good in Chenevard's thesis, it is simply contempt for futility and the conviction that great painting relies on great ideas'. See Baudelaire 2002j, p. 606.

20 Chenevard was one of the few at that time who spoke in favour of the revolutionary political legacy of the First Republic (the regicidal republic) of 1792. His first projects for competition – *M. de Dreux-Brézé et Mirabeau*, about Mirabeau saying 'no' on 23 June 1789 to the king's messenger, and *Séance de Nuit à la Convention Nationale, 20 Janvier 1793*, about the meeting that decided in favour of the execution of Louis XVI – received praise from Baudelaire for their 'philosophy of history'. See Baudelaire 2002j, p. 606.

However, a problem remains. The past tense is not the verb tense of Baudelaire's sentences, which have the hortatory tone of someone who judges the present, while dialoguing with a chorus-like collective individual to whom he proposes the creation of the 'temple of the Revolution', which will 'contain the history of humanity':

The modern Temple and the modern Sanctity are the Revolution. Thus *let us create the Temple of the Revolution* and the painting of the Revolution ... The modern Pantheon will contain the *History of Humanity*.²¹

There is also an exhortation to commit deicide. However, while regicide had already taken place, the throne had returned. Hence, the text calls for a death-blow against the foundation of the divine right of kings: 'Pan must kill God. Pan is the people'.²²

Baudelaire's notes are permeated by an urgency of tone, claiming the legacy of the regicidal Republic and calling for a new revolution yet to be carried out. This conception even shines through in content not intended for the public. This is in line with texts of a conspiratorial or insurrectionary character plotting a response to the genocide of June 48. These draw on the *sans-culotte* and Jacobin notion of revolution, the post-Thermidorian conspiratorial revolutionary tradition, which began with the Plebeian Manifesto (1795) and the Conspiracy of the Equals (1796), by Gracchus Babeuf, and was taken up by Buonarrotti and reached to Auguste Blanqui, the great prisoner and Baudelaire's contemporary. According to Walter Benjamin, Blanqui is not only alluded to in a passage of 'Les Litanies de Satan', but is also the possible object of a stanza of the poem 'Le Guignon'.²³

21 Baudelaire's emphasis.

22 This passage possibly comprises other allusions: the Greek prefix 'pan' means 'all' and the following sentence seems to unfold this meaning when it explains that Pan is the people. And Pan, taken as an interjection, may evoke a shot; thus, it may evoke the shooting of God, hypothetically submitting, in a loud revelry, the foundation of order to the same policy with which the bourgeoisie had perpetrated the June massacre at the Tuileries. By chance or literally, the scene painted by Manet, shortly after the death of Baudelaire, of the shooting of Maximilian of Habsburg by the Mexican republican army aims at simultaneity in relation to the noise or suggests in a meta-linguistic tone that the pictorial act entails some equivalence to the shot portrayed. Why not? – if the imperative of the artistic act, to which Baudelaire referred, was the one of doing something as quickly as possible in order for the 'orders of the spirit' to 'never (be) changed by the hesitations of the hand' (see footnote 2).

23 Benjamin recognised Blanqui's characteristics in the figure of the outcast alluded to

Demonic Trend

In short, one cannot separate Baudelaire's systematic reflection on 'modern art' from the concurrent verdict he passed on the contemporary order in *Mon Coeur Mis à Nu*, XLIV: 'Every newspaper, from first line to last, is a tissue of horrors. ... Everything in this world sweats with crime: the newspaper, the walls, and men's faces'.²⁴

Thus, the meditated anger and the vengeful plot were not strange to Baudelaire's poetry. Nor was he averse to a systematic view of 'modern art' as a new Luciferin tradition, as opposed to what he qualified as the 'beatitude' of the preceding art. In this sense, in 1861–1862 he affirmed: '[M]odern art has an essentially demonic tendency. And it seems to me that this infernal part of man, which man takes pleasure in explicating to himself, grows larger daily'.²⁵

Similarly, in 1861, he wrote the following in a letter about a project in the making:²⁶

in a verse of 'Les Litanies de Satan': 'You who produce in the outcast the calm and haughty look [*Toi qui fais au proscrit ce regard calme et haut*]'. See Baudelaire 2002g, p. 124. Similarly, Oehler found in the verses of 'Le Guignon' allusions to Blanqui (according to oral information given to me by Oehler in November 2010, the album *Baudelaire*, edited by Pichois, features a drawing of Blanqui, by Baudelaire, made on a version of 'Le Guignon'. I did not have access to that edition). Indeed, Baudelaire sent the handwritten version of the poem to Théophile Gautier, to the *Revue de Paris*, between September 1851 and January 1852; in it, the second half of the poem comes from two stanzas, written in English, over a portrait of Blanqui that the editor Poulet-Malassis dated 1850 or perhaps 1849. For the original stanzas, see Pichois 2002, p. 859. On Baudelaire and Blanqui, see Abensour 1986, pp. 219–247.

24 See Baudelaire 2002l, pp. 705–706.

25 'Until a very late moment of modern times, art, poetry, and music above all, had no other goals than to delight the spirit presenting it with images of beatitude, in contrast to the horrible life of strife and struggle in which we are immersed./ Beethoven began to rummage through the worlds of incurable melancholy and despair piled up like clouds in the inner sky of man ... modern art has an essentially demonic tendency. And it seems that this infernal part of man, which man takes pleasure in explicating to himself, grows larger daily'. See Baudelaire 2002k, p. 168. Similarly, the references to David's austere republican art as the origin of 'modern art' all highlight the explicit break with the attitude of satisfaction and serenity of the past. See Baudelaire 2002b, pp. 408–499, 412; 2002c, p. 428; 2002e, pp. 583–584; 2002h, p. 610; 2002m, p. 744.

26 See Pichois 2002, p. 1468.

[A] great book I have been dreaming about for two years: *Mon Coeur Mis à Nu*, where I'll pile up all my fits of anger.

Oh! If ever that sees the light of day, the *Confessions of J[ean]-J[acques]* will seem pale.²⁷

On 3 June 1863, in a letter to his mother he declared that that book had become 'the true passion of [his] brain' and repeated the earlier comparison: 'a book that will be different from Jean-Jacques's *Confessions*'.

Two days later, in another letter:

Yes, this book so much dreamt about will be a book of rancours ... I will turn against *all of France* my real talent for impertinence. I have need of vengeance like a tired man has need of a bath.²⁸

For Baudelaire, the purpose of vengeance was at the heart of the project for a system of 'modern art'. Oehler accurately points out the objective and historical roots of such a state of mind, shared by Flaubert:

[The June days] mark ... a turning point for them [Flaubert and Baudelaire]: from the experience of the massacres of 48 their notion of humanity is ... one of humanity always ready to commit the worst crimes. Henceforth, for them the task of the writer consists in reminding the public of the memory of a crime so irremediable that one is willing to forget it.²⁹

In short, in the context of the Bonapartism of the Second Empire, in which popular anger against the slaughter of June 48 adds to the anger caused by the expropriation of plebeian neighbourhoods of Paris during Haussmann's renovations, popular fury is engendered and will result in the Commune of 1871. Such events also prompt the poetic works of Flaubert and Baudelaire, and the latter's critical project on 'modern art' as a system and a plot aimed at avenging the crimes of 1848, which he extended to the bourgeoisie as a whole.

²⁷ Apud Pichois 2002, p. 1467.

²⁸ Apud Pichois 2002, p. 1468.

²⁹ See Oehler 2003, p. 314.

Satanism and Didactics

It is worth specifying the content of the didactic function of ‘modern art’, which would be articulated to an epic dimension, an essential predicate of such art, as Baudelaire had insisted since the ‘Salon of 46’.

Despite Baudelaire’s personal regard for Chenavard³⁰ and the appreciation the critic had come to rationally develop for the *didactic* function of art – a tendency that was not immediate to him³¹ – the distilled ferocity of Baudelaire’s projects, added to the memory of the June events, could not be consistent with the supra-classist candour of Chenavard’s philosophy of history, reaching its apogee in a ‘Peace Marseillaise’ – an ersatz bourgeois myth of Progress.

Thus, from Baudelaire’s perspective, Satanism and ‘modern holiness’ – or the ‘love of *Justice*’, as he terms it some lines below in his notes³² – would be combined to produce an explosive synthesis against the petrification of history.³³ The modern religion, with its new temple for the history of humanity, would have to be the Revolution, a Satanic work that, according to the notes, would include the death of God and would bring about a just and effective response to the crimes of 1848.

30 ‘I cannot help but feel sympathy for an artist like Chenavard, always worthy of admiration ... and charming even in his burdens’. See Baudelaire 2002h, p. 611.

31 ‘Even though I consider philosopher artists heretics, I often come to admire their efforts due to my own reason’. See Baudelaire 2002i, p. 604.

32 Baudelaire’s emphasis. See Baudelaire 2002j, p. 606.

33 Oehler’s interpretation of the prose poem ‘Le Mauvais Vitrier’ (published in *La Presse*, 26 August 1862) points precisely to the content of the state of mind of the poet that is not idiosyncratic, but historically objectified and consistent with the achievement of a large-scale attack against order: ‘The glazier is depicted as a poor wretch, not like someone who is guilty; he himself is nothing but the catalyst of a dissatisfaction – which has long fermented in the narrator – with the state of things, which one day, unexpectedly, is attributed to the glazier ... The comparison between the loud noise produced by shattering of glass (when the narrator throws a vase against the glazier) and the shattering of a crystal palace struck by lightning reveals what the targets were of the narrator’s secret fancies about an *action d’éclat*: the constructions representative of the new Paris, allegedly so beautiful, the temples of consumerism that could be admired at the Universal Expositions or, on a smaller scale, on the grand boulevards. The writer, a symbolic perpetrator of assaults, launches his first attack to the new Paris’. See Oehler 1999, p. 297.

In fact, the trauma of 1848 'splits modern society' into two halves.³⁴ There are many, from Marx to Sartre, who point out the inescapable character of class war after this event.

Thus, the trauma of 48 affects not only those who focus on it. No one remains immune, and even thinkers who do not directly deal with social history are affected. The year of 1848 was a watershed that annulled all natural premises of social order, even those consonant with theological and patriarchal models. Contrary to contractualism – whose legal rationalism, contemporaneous with mercantilism, presupposed a conscious volitional act of two presumably free abstract subjects as the origin of social order – new hypotheses and models were formulated. These were grounded on violence, with forms related to brutal regimes.

In these models, even if the original hypothesis was established falsely or inaccurately, in quasi-mythical terms, the form of their mode of domination marked something immanent and historical, albeit indirectly. This is what is verified, for example, in the formula of the domain of the strong, in Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals* (1887), or in the idea of parricidal totemism as the origin of laws, according to Freud in *Totem and Taboo* (1913). Nietzsche and Freud are less explicit and direct than the 'dialectical image' of crime as the basis of social order, posited by Baudelaire and Flaubert.³⁵ But they all exude the raw brutality of the aftermath of the trauma of June 48.

Improvisation

In Baudelaire's account, then, what specific programme falls to 'modern art' in combination with the purpose of revenge?

Amid the combination of conspiratorial imagination and aesthetic elaboration, against the petrification of history under the bourgeois sign of progress, another critical and reflexive finding of Baudelaire emerges: the programme-project of 'modern art' should be conceived as a didactic but necessarily unfinished system, mediated by improvisation, that is, founded on the concrete specificity of each situation.

34 See Marx and Engels 1990, p. 31, apud Oehler 1999, p. 65.

35 See the prose poem 'Le Gâteau' in Baudelaire 2002p, pp. 297–299; see also the poem 'Abel et Caïn', already mentioned in footnote 5.

Heteronomous or Derivative Poetics

Of course, by valuing improvisation and spontaneity, Baudelaire's conspiratorial philosophy distinguishes itself from a systematic and finished theory of the revolution, as well as a well-defined and complete programme for 'modern art'.

Let us elaborate on this. Early on, his philosophy of art excludes different basic structures or privileged procedures, conceived by many authors throughout the twentieth century as constructions typical and characteristic of 'modern art' (namely, abstract art, the dodecaphonic system, functionalist architecture, free verse, automatic poetry, autonomous form, concrete art, among others). Why does Baudelaire do this? Because all these modes would come to form nothing but positive and reified practices and forms, formalised independently of concrete historical situations and class war. Hence, despite often having his photograph taken, one can accept Baudelaire's diatribe against the apology of photography as a modern language in itself.

By contrast, of what would the unfinished system of 'modern art' consist? How would philosophy and the narrative of history nourished by improvisation develop their didactic function?

At this point, the value of the notes in question comes to the fore. By articulating what he calls a 'chimerical' and derivative 'aesthetic', Baudelaire leads us to understand 'modern art' as 'involuntary and spontaneous' (which means for him 'of the people').³⁶ Baudelaire conceives a system that is necessarily without an essential structure and future-oriented, as the verb tenses in the sentences at hand suggest. This is, then, an open or unfinished system. As such, it is fundamentally different from the models listed above, which would emerge as propositions of defined structural extraction (abstract art, functionalist architecture, concrete art, etc.).

Though it does not have a basic structure, Baudelaire's system is not formless. It is articulated or mediated dialectically by a – specified – otherness, which as an external force compels him to improvise or, in other words, to embrace the dialectical invasion of heteronomous forms. What forms? Those that foreshadow an aesthetics of collage and montage? With what materials? Therein lies the crux of the matter, which unfolds and concretely assumes one mode or another.

36 See Baudelaire 2002j, p. 606.

Involuntary and Spontaneous Aesthetics

In *The Painter of Modern Life*, the fertilisation of the work by improvisation was based 'on the intoxication and wrath of pencil and brush, on unconscious realisation'.³⁷ Similarly, the passage in question evokes '... involuntary, spontaneous aesthetics'.

To this is added another aspect of the problem, which multiplies the uncertainties: how to systematise a non-system? How to establish a system based on improvisation?

Put simply, the systematically meditated idea of preparing a break with petrified history would tend to be formulated on the basis of a near and certain end. However, as the implied situation belongs to an open future, should the system take shape in determined terms, it would look restorative, risking redemption and reified mythologies, and conforming to pre-existing aesthetic structures.

An image-idea then crystallises as a constant dialectical oscillation between opposite poles with no possible synthesis in the despotic situation of the Second Empire. The heterogenous combination between a meditated process and, in contrast, the tragic awareness of a temporary, incomplete, or unfinished achievement, is thus conceived as a transition to a condition barely outlined.

This dialectical image is one of *revenge*. It is bound to the satanic content of 'modern art', conceived as an artificial form deriving from spontaneous forces that invade from the outside, under the fatal and vital forms of the people, as Baudelaire notes.

In summary, the heteronomous factors thus specified (according to the notes, in the terms of the 'involuntary, spontaneous, fatal, and vital aesthetics of the people')³⁸ could only be the forms of popular struggles (of June 48 and so on). The new epic, 'modern art', derives from these conflicts as a 'chimerical aesthetics, that is (designed aesthetics) *a posteriori*, individual, artificial'. It would arise from the popular struggles, whose forcibly contingent and open modes emerge through improvisation.³⁹

Let us carry out a test and return to the notes in question to revisit the passage, replacing 'Temple of the Revolution' with 'modern art', and 'painting of the Revolution' with 'revenge'. The passage would then read as follows:

37 See Baudelaire 2002n, p. 699.

38 See Baudelaire 2002j, p. 606.

39 See *ibid.*

The modern Temple and the modern Sanctity are the Revolution. Thus *let us create the Temple of the Revolution*⁴⁰ [or 'let us create modern art'],⁴¹ and the Painting of the Revolution [or 'revenge']. This means that the modern Pantheon will contain *the history of humanity*.⁴²

Pan must kill God. Pan is the people.

Chimerical aesthetics [or 'Modern art/ or revenge'], that is [action] *a posteriori*,⁴³ individual, artificial, a substitute for an aesthetics that is involuntary, spontaneous, fatal, vital, and popular [or 'a substitute for the popular struggles', replacing an 'involuntary aesthetics ... of the people'].

Seen in this way, 'modern art', the object of Baudelaire's necessarily unfinished system, will never be definitively achieved, unlike the successive *ersatzes* mentioned above, which, posited as hypostasised and autonomous forms, were conceived in isolation, in the formalist manner of an art impervious to the general historical process and especially to the fundamental framework of class struggle.

In summary, it can be said that the thesis implied in Baudelaire's notes is that the form of 'modern art' follows the form of popular struggles and is necessarily unfinished, like a *permanent revolution*.

40 Baudelaire's emphasis.

41 Emphasis added.

42 Baudelaire's emphasis.

43 Baudelaire's emphasis.

The Hemicycle: The Image of the Nation-Form

Direct Dialogue

‘One would have to imagine it as it was before’, says David, in a letter dated 9 December 1789. So begins the painter’s explanation of the *allegory* of France, ‘torn and tattered’, sketched for a study requested by the city of Nantes to celebrate the uprising that anticipated the Revolution.¹

The first of such attempts, which took nearly half a year, backfired. The second, which will be the focus here, resulted in a visual conception developed in the form of a detailed drawing, a project for a painting that was left unfinished. The project reveals an ample renewal of David’s pictorial view, which abandons allegory as the primary figurative element.

This time it is a work commissioned by the National Constituent Assembly. According to a proposition by the deputy Dubois-Crancé on 28 October 1790, the painting should celebrate the act of 20 June 1789, considered one of the starting points of the constitutional order. The deputies of the Third Estate (at a meeting in Versailles where the Estates-General were summoned by the king) found that the doors of the meeting hall of the *Hôtel des Menus-Plaisirs du Roi*, where they were supposed to gather, were locked. They then headed to a sports hall – the *Salle du Jeu de Paume* (an ancient form of tennis), in the village of Versailles – and there made the public oath to remain there until they had set out a constitution for the country.²

¹ See Michel 1988a, pp. 56–57.

² See Michel 1988a, pp. 58–60. The pledge was primarily intended to preserve the room where the historical oath took place (said *du Jeu de Paume*). Secondly, it proposed the realisation of a painting by David, which depicted the oath and even stipulated the dimensions: 30 feet high × 20 feet wide (approx. 10 × 6.6 m) – dimensions that would later be inverted by the painter in his drawing, so that the dominant axis of the drawing was horizontal. The painting was intended to adorn the plenary of the Assembly. The pledge was probably drafted in collaboration with the painter, a friend of the deputy. The oath literally stated the intention of the deputies: ‘not to separate, and to reassemble wherever circumstances require, until the constitution of the kingdom is established and consolidated upon firm foundations’ [*‘jamais se séparer et de se rassembler partout où les circonstances l’exigeront, jusqu’à ce que la Constitution du royaume soit établie et affermie sur des bases solides’*]. See Soboul 2005b, p. 979.

David presented the project for the painting *The Tennis Court Oath* at the Salon of 1791 as a drawing (*Le Serment du Jeu de Paume*, 1791). It was exhibited right below his painting *Oath of the Horatii* (1785), already presented at the Salon of 1785, with great success. We can assume that the re-presentation of the latter was meant to evoke a comparison between the new and the previous work, both belonging to the genre of historic painting, which according to tradition carried enlightening standards. Thus, on my assumption, it highlighted the fact that, while the 1785 painting alluded to an incident of ancient history (in this case, the formation of the Roman Republic when the Etruscan king was overthrown), the 1791 project, in turn, faced the challenge of focusing on the present; it flouted the academic rule that only permitted themes from ancient history to enter the historic genre.³

The theme of *The Tennis Court Oath* is, in short, the proud union of free men, a theme typical of the *philosophes* such as Rousseau. The composition is structured according to a frontal axis that articulates the aesthetic pact as a direct dialogue between different political actors, and is the main vector of dialogue with the public, embodied by the spectator of the painting.

From here, David's procedure escapes both Baroque scenes and Diderot's aesthetic naturalism. Earlier, in the *Oath of the Horatii*, David had followed the set of anti-academic and anti-palatial views of Diderot, set out in *Essays on Painting* (1765). The philosopher had proposed a new pact for painting on two fronts: the relation with reality, and that with the spectator; in short, a painting close to things and to the visual participant, with a colloquial and dramatic *diction*.⁴ According to this, in the *Oath* of 1785 David had elaborated a form of painting that was severe yet conducive to the exaltation of civic sentiments – encouraged by a Diderotian theatrical perspective, which led the spectator, close to the characters in profile, to feel like a direct witness to the scene.

Frontality and Transparency

In the new *Oath*, of the *Tennis Court*, however, by turning the main vector of the scene, making it frontal or symmetrical to the vector of the spectator, David found a way to make a pictorial pact in a context of direct dialogue. Brought

3 One could argue that the focus of the thematic shift from ancient to modern responded to the controversy in the 80s salons between the neoclassical tendency, to which David had belonged, focusing on ancient history, and a new trend that advocated themes from national history. See Michel 1985, p. 120.

4 See Diderot 1996a.

together by the bond of *frontality* and directly correlated observation – defended by Diderot⁵ – the deputies portrayed in the drawing – starting with the president of the Third Estate, astronomer Bailly, faced the viewer and public of the work. In this *visual scene* and thus also *in the aesthetic experience*, a meeting of wills was made manifest in visual terms, as a public and equitable political pact between different political actors. In the face-to-face position suggested by the painter, two protagonists (political representatives and onlookers) are practically symmetrical. If the symmetry is not absolute, it is because the spectator, positioned as judge in a slightly higher perspective, assumes full transparency and omniscience beyond dialogic reciprocity.

It is true that some Baroque figures were depicted frontally, but this was an isolated practice or a partial aspect, rather than a quintessential dimension of this art. Courtly or palatial spatiality implied a spatio-temporal accumulation of planes and/or settings, like veils that overlapped and reciprocally intensified the fictional dimension. In this situation, with a predominantly labyrinthine (or palatial) structure, each figure appeared as a mask or simulated presence, amid the proliferation of ambiguous signs, multi-temporal origins and spatial effects that merged into one another.

Breaking with this courtly economy, David's composition – in its undisguised ambiance, stark arrangement, and stripped-down spatiality – is consistent with the ambition of communicative transparency and universalist and egalitarian values, as proposed by Rousseau.

The *The Tennis Court Oath*, drawing on Rousseau's philosophy, informs and empowers Diderot's scenic-narrative programme. It aligns the scene depicted with universalised and transparent public action. The action is presented directly to the public, in the manner of a tribune unveiling his proposal to the assembly. The image values dialogue as an element of the historical situation, that is, the formation of the nation.

Accordingly, the oath, the political agreement of general reconstruction of relations and practices, appears simultaneously as a construction of the present – which engages the spectator in the role of witness and direct participant and as a general or universal proposal, since the Third Estate – a collective subject of the action, gathering, in the case of the painting, characters and spectators – represented 96 percent of the nation, as the Abbé Sieyès noted in the manifesto *Qu'est-ce que le Tiers État?* (1789).⁶

5 See, for example, among others, Chapter 1, 'Mes pensées bizarres sur le dessin', in Diderot 1996a, pp. 467–477.

6 The manifesto started with questions and answers that became emblematic: '1) What is the

Horizontality and Historicity

Alongside frontality, we must consider the strength of another vector, whose effect, though distinct, reinforces the communicative and dramatic intensity of the work. It is the horizontality of the scene, based on classical art this time, which establishes and enriches the visual synthesis of *The Tennis Court Oath*.

Thus, a large horizontal structure, which dominates the lower part – the spatial distribution of the deputies – is highlighted by two other horizontal structures, arranged diagonally on the left and right sides of the upper part of the composition: the two side galleries reveal the internal spectators of the scene. At the heart of this articulation there is an empty space, a model of open, abstract and geometrical space; even though it is square, this space is perceived as a horizontal structure due to the arrangement of the rectangular stone blocks of the wall, which function as modules.

The horizontal expansion of the representation probably comes from the moment when David found a way to convey the desired meaning and grandiosity of the scene, since the first sketches of the room depict it as a long, narrow space. The horizontal narrative axis was typical of Greek pediments and later of friezes recounting Roman conquests.⁷ The device proved very useful. Without annulling depth – an effect absent from both Greek and Roman reliefs – David establishes an inverse procedure of reflection and psychological distance. Facing the empathy caused by the frontal figures, the painter's decision to emphasise the horizontal line and open the field of observation adds a historical and monumental sense to the scene.

Under the Force of the Facts

In short, in the project of *The Tennis Court Oath*, its topicality – arising from frontality – and historicity – arising from the horizontality of the frieze –

Third Estate? Everything. 2) What has it been hitherto in the political order? Nothing. 3) What does it desire to be? Something'. Apud Suratteau 2005a, p. 982.

7 If it had not come directly from Greek art – except in the possible case of having had access to the fragment of the Panathenaic procession of the Parthenon frieze, taken from Athens in 1788 at the behest of Choiseul-Gouffier, ambassador of Louis XVI in Istanbul, and appropriated by the Revolution in 1792 – David had probably seen drawings of the Parthenon. One way or another, he knew directly and extensively the language of the Roman friezes, and given his direct contact in Rome with Winckelmann, he also knew about the civic value of the pediments topping Greek temples.

intersect and give monumental value to the current scene; it is a landmark to be remembered. The purpose is to enable the viewer to perceive the greatness of what he sees and to also feel what is happening, with the power of a current event.⁸

In other words, the heroisation of ancient times, typical of Neoclassicism, is transmuted through the actualising elements of the project into a universal condition, or at least extended to all participants in the process. The will of the majority, thanks to the factor of exponentiation and idealisation, receives the ontological status of the *general will*, if the homology between David's project and certain ideas of Rousseau is correct.⁹ The imagined nation, an idealised community of free and rational citizens or individuals, is thereby turned into a visible formulation.¹⁰

However, surpassed by the dizzying speed of the revolutionary process, the painter abandoned *The Tennis Court Oath* in the middle of the following year: 1792. It is not that he lacked the resources to carry out the project.¹¹ In fact, according to the painter, history moved forward faster than the painting, so it lost its original meaning.¹²

8 In effect, from then on, all paintings made by David for the Revolution, beginning with that about the murdered deputy Lepeletier de Saint Fargeau (1793), now missing, would be characterised by a horizontal and flattened out arrangement, and by shallow depth. Thus, in terms similar to the ones of a metope or parietal section of the temple's frieze, they were like selections that implied a whole. Thus, the paintings *Marat Breathing his Last/ The Death of Marat* (1793) and *The Death of Young Bara* (1794) are only apparently arranged as isolated close-ups. They are actually like a sentence or verse from a longer narrative of which the public is already aware.

9 Those who observe David's *Les Lictteurs Rapportant à Brutus les Corps de ses Fils* (1789), and compare it with Rousseau's interpretation of the historical event, presented in one of the letters in which the philosopher responds to the objections against his *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* (1749–1750), cannot fail to recognise the extreme parallelism. See Rousseau 1992, pp. 117–118. Such a proximity is not surprising when we note the many occasions on which David tried to present himself as more a man of ideas than a professional painter. He said on one occasion, referring to academics: 'they turn painting into a craft (*métier*), but I despise the craft like I despise mud' (*boue* – a term that in the jargon of French painters also meant 'palette'). Apud Michel 1988a, p. 71. For a synoptic view of Rousseau's political ideas, see Chapter 6 ('Le Droit, l'État et la Société'), in Cassirer 1970, pp. 240–273.

10 On the idea of the nation as an 'idealised community', see Anderson 1999.

11 After the initial proposition of Dubois-Crancé, a second pledge, presented by deputy Barère, led the Assembly to approve, on 29 September 1791, the transference of the costs of the project to the national treasury. See Michel 1988a, pp. 68–70.

12 In September 1792 David declared to the Convention that the work had been overcome

The Hemicycle

This is a short version of the story. But let us analyse the drawing to see how far David's ideas advanced in order to represent the revolutionary refoundation of France or the making of its modern form as a nation. The spatial arrangement of the members of the Assembly, with outstretched arms, suggests multiple rays towards one single point – the reading of the oath by the president – and outlines a semicircular structure, unlike the print by Prieur, a contemporary illustrator who depicted the same theme (*Le Serment du Jeu de Paume/ Le 20 Juin 1789, 1791*), for the series of prints *Les Tableaux de la Révolution Française*.¹³

Other signs of the scene reinforce the value of the hemicycle shape: in the foreground, the trio of representatives from the three orders, comprising the bodies of the kingdom in transition to the nation-form, circumscribes two quadrants with their arms and faces.¹⁴ The hemicycle is outlined as a spatial structure of understanding, reconciliation and dialogue between diverse or antithetical positions. The semicircular module outlined by the trio in their reciprocity, like three vertices of a triangle, also outlines the reduced semicircular structure formed by all deputies.

by the facts and had lost its *raison d'être*. It was notorious that a great schism, dividing Republicans and Monarchists, had already separated the deputies who were depicted together in the oath scene. In particular, Bailly, the president of the Assembly, who in the painting plays a central role reading the oath, had fallen into disrepute. He was held responsible as the mastermind of the massacre in which the troops of La Fayette had opened fire on 17 July 1791 against a crowd of 6,000 people – many of whom women and children – who had gathered around the Altar of the Nation, on the Champs de Mars, in support of a petition for the Republic. The shots left more than fifty dead and hundreds injured; moreover, the survivors were persecuted by the cavalry on neighbouring streets. The fact marked 'an irreversible rupture inside the Third Estate'. See Dorigny 2005a, pp. 202–203. See also Michel 1988a, p. 69.

13 See Hould 2005, pp. 41–48.

14 The three deputies representing the general reconciliation and, in their way, the general union of the three orders, nobility, clergy, and the Third Estate, in a single Assembly are: in the centre, a priest, the Abbé Grégoire (1750–1831), a notable member of the Third Estate; on his right, the traditionalist *Chartreux* Don Gerle, and on his left, Rabaut Saint-Étienne (1743–1793), a protestant minister, then a very influential writer of pamphlets for the Third Estate. For a country like France, once ravaged by religious quarrels, the equilateral ecumenical triangle, conceived by David to portray the meeting between the lower clergy, traditionalist Catholicism, and the Protestants, evinced an unprecedented degree of symbolism and hope. For the general identification of the figures drawn by David, see Bordes 1983, ill. 240.

The circular procession of jubilant waving hats and the visual multiplication of brims and tops, spotted as semicircular shapes, are presented in a similar way. Finally, the choir also includes elements evoking the hemicycle, in the foreground, the feet of the figures that create a kind of perimetral semicircular order between the empty spot and the occupied portion. In the lower left corner, in the foreground, there are also a basket, balls, and a racket, sports equipment of the tennis court, which here suggest the general structure of the composition through circular variations. To complete the mapping of the variations of this basic shape, it suffices to imagine a minimal operation: to replace the members of the Assembly, arranged in the court, with support points or seats. In this way we will be able to obtain a model of the shape of an amphitheatre, today adopted by almost all modern parliaments, with the exception of England's – which in fact admits its coexistence with the monarchical principle and is essentially oblivious to the circle of equals.¹⁵

15 By way of comparison, the reader may look for the various images of the assembly of the Estates General, made in accordance with monarchic symbols; for example Isidore-Stanislas Helman's *Ouverture des Etats Généraux*, 1790, Paris Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Estampes (rep. in Marrinan 1988, ill. 110); and J.M. Moreau le jeune's *Ouverture des Etats Généraux par Louis Seize à Versailles le 5 Mai 1789*, (rep. in Marrinan 1988, ill. 113). On the other hand, the hemicycle appears, as décor, in two prints, made after the Thermidor, but which focus on the day of the invasion of the Convention by the people in revolt, carrying the head of Thermidorian deputy Ferraud. See Helman, *Journée du 1 Prairial de l'an 111/ Ferraud, Représentant du Peuple Assassiné dans la Convention Nationale*, 1797 (rep. in Marrinan 1988, ill. 117); P.-G. Berthault and J.-D. Berthault, *Assassinat du Député Ferraud dans la Convention Nationale/ le 1er Prairial, An 3ème de la République*, 1796 (rep. in Marrinan 1988, ill. 118). See also, by way of confirmation, the abundant iconography about the oath of Louis-Philippe, Duke of Orléans, as the 'constitutional monarch' of France in 1830. The latter ones, although hybrid in form, since the new regime comes after a revolution (1830) against the reformed version of the Ancien Régime, resort to a more informal and crowded scene, but in no way to the hemicycle. See, for example, Eugène Devéria, *Serment de Louis-Philippe devant les Pairs et les Députés*, 1836 (rep. in Marrinan 1988, ill. 77); Félix Auvray, *Le Serment de Louis-Philippe*, 1839, (rep. in Marrinan 1988, ill. 106); Blanc, 9 *Août 1830: Le Serment du Roi*, 1830–1831; Joseph-Désirée Court, *Le Serment de Louis-Philippe*, 1830, (rep. in Marrinan 1988, ill. 129); Amable-Paul Coutan and Joseph-Désirée Court, *Le Serment de Louis-Philippe*, 1837 (rep. in Marrinan 1988, ill. 129). For a variety of prints depicting the Tennis Court Oath, without the use of the hemicycle, see Bordes 1983, ill. 245–261. It is worth mentioning, although it is not possible to make a digression here about the differences between French and English history, and the symbols of the revolutions in either nation, that the House of Commons of the English Parliament is spatially organised not in the form of a hemicycle, but rather as a rectangle, accessible through a passage or section

David's decision to use the hemicycle as a basic structure for his project, which was later adopted by almost all western parliaments, uses pre-existing forms. In fact, twenty years earlier, in 1769, the architect Gondoin (1731–1818) had designed an amphitheatre for the anatomy classes of the Paris School of Medicine.¹⁶ Architect Ledoux (1736–1806), in turn, maintained that architecture should be a philosophical experience, in order for 'man to improve through his own sensations'.¹⁷ Likewise, in the 1780s the architect Boullée (1728–1799) had made sketches of projects that envisaged the construction of gigantic amphitheatres for about 300,000 spectators who, like participants in the Rousseauist republican festival, would be 'simultaneously objects and political actors of their gathering'.¹⁸ This is not to mention the combination of the idea of the Agora and Hellenistic amphitheatre – the latter seen by the painter in Italy many times.

David's manoeuvre implies other assumptions. One of them includes a critique of previous pictorial representations. It is known that the genre of courtly history painting, of the Ancien Régime, was permeated by hyperbole and *trompe l'oeils*, recurrent throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. To counter that, there was nothing more logical than resorting to old visual models associated with the original democratic and republican ideals.

However, let us avoid exclusivity or unilateralism in determining sources, which is characteristic of formalist historiography, concerned as it is with building a pure history of arts and ideas.

The situation, in its own greatness, required new syntheses, in line with the uniqueness of the occasion and the power of the facts. Thus, the privilege conferred to the semi-circle did not engender a sterile, simply formal act. In addition to emphasising the relevance of the moment, the disposition of arms in a hemicycle compels the spectator to complete the circle.

installed at one of the shorter ends. See, for example, the large painting, with about 400 figures, by Sir George Hayter, *The House of Commons*, 1833, oil on canvas, 330.3 × 497.8 cm, National Portrait Gallery, purchased by the government and donated to the museum in 1858. From where does the idea of a rectangular disposition of Members of Parliament originate? Those who confer will see that it is the same disposition as the members of the Estates General, in French prints ...

16 See Jacques and Mouilleseaux 1988, p. 18.

17 Ibid.

18 Boullée's project, a Coliseum to be built in the Étoile, in Paris, was intended to 'meet moral and political views' and 'lead to good behaviour' (Essai, 120). With possibly Rousseauist intentions, the discourse speaks of an 'amphitheatre in which no one can escape the eyes of the crowd' (Essai, 121). Apud Jacques and Mouilleseaux 1988, p. 18.

The potentially active role of the observer as a participant in the legislative scene, member of a collective order and the last link to close the circle, forming a symmetrical and well-ordered nation, is also reinforced by other decisive operations of the project: the composition in natural scale (verifiable in the early fragments of the final work, today, paradoxically, in the palace of Versailles museum [sic]); and the horizontality and shortening of depth.

In short, as the object of the approximation, the observer feels like a virtual part of a whole, a constituent point in a symmetrical and equitable social universe.

Ideal, harmonious, stable, and classical in form – in many ways antithetical to the convulsive and whirling character of *The Last Judgment* by Michelangelo (1475–1564), for the Sistine Chapel¹⁹ – David's project was indeed probably the first work since classical Greek art, unless I am mistaken, made with the intention of heightening the function of observation as a participant in an ethical and political collectivity. In 1791, classical patterns and the creative gesture were aimed at an earthly and balanced political cosmos, in which the citizen and the universe were reciprocally determined, in contrast to a timeless and supra-political closed circle of scholars, like *The School of Athens* (1508–1511), painted by Raphael (1483–1520) for the rooms of Pope Julius II.²⁰

The Denial of Allegory

In the combination of appropriations and reformulations, a new visual economy was sketched, imbued with republican values and expectations, which caused several points of friction with the visual rhetoric of the time. One of its most relevant topics resided in the abandonment of the device of *allegory*, peddled by Winckelmann (1717–1768), then central to the painting of ideas. How should we understand David's denial of allegory?

I think the denial of *allegory* is concomitant with the painter's desire to elaborate a visual economy equivalent to the consistency and vigour of the *philosophes's* discourse. The rejection is remarkable, since it contradicts the general tendency and prevailing taste.²¹ It is perhaps the first 'avant-garde' operation in painting. *Allegory* involved a decryption – of the transmutation of idea

19 For David's interest in the *Final Judgment* by Michelangelo, at the moment of the conception of the *Serment*, pointed out by Virginia Lee, see Bordes 1983, p. 43.

20 For David's frequent references to Raphael, see Bordes 1983, pp. 42–43.

21 The use of allegory was so frequent that it is superfluous to select examples. However, one case is curiously illustrative of its conventional and often laudatory dimension: the

into image, and vice versa – this required the mastery of a code and therefore a restricted circle of participants.²² Is that why David chose to experiment in another direction? It is not unlikely for an author who was concerned with imbuing painting with universalism and intelligibility. In any case, Diderot's criticism of *allegory*, among other academic modes, was pressing. Diderot demanded that painting be fundamentally 'intelligible to a man of sound judgment, no more'; and added: 'I turn my back on a painter who proposes to me an emblem, a cryptogram to decipher'.²³

To fully clarify David's critical position towards *allegory*, or the reason for the distinction he makes between its use in painting and in scenery, is perhaps impossible – at least now. However, more significant is the experimental act of dispensing with *allegory* in favour of an uncertain quest; a direction that was in fact maintained in David's subsequent paintings for the Revolution.²⁴ It is

typically allegorical paintings of Clement-Louis Belle (1722–1806), today called *La Convention Nationale Décrète l'Abolition de la Monarchie* (1794), and *La Convention Nationale Donne à la France le Code des Lois Républicaines* (1794), were originally commissioned by the king, via the d'Angivillier count, from the painter, member of the Academy since 1761, and since 1763 linked to the manufacture of Gobelins carpets. They were destined under other titles to ornament the Palace of Justice. The work, which had begun in the form of loom-cards, was made in 1788–1789 and paid for in 1790 by the Crown. Later, the meaning of his allegories changed, and they were approved by a revolutionary republican jury in 1794. When adjusted to the new situation, they served to ornament the same room of the Palace of Justice. Thus, the pro-Revolution allegories took their present shape. See Chevalier's notes on Belle's paintings, in Bordes 1996, pp. 43–45.

22 See Michel 1988b, pp. 29–30.

23 See Chapter v, 'Paragraphe sur la composition où j'espère que j'en parlerai', in Diderot 1996a, p. 497. Although the *Essais* were only published in 1795, that is, thirty years after they were written, it is quite possible that David, whom Diderot admired, had read them before publication. This fact can be quickly checked by the reader: the agenda of requirements and issues of the composition dealt with by Diderot, in this 'paragraph', is practically the same as that of David's painting: intelligibility; unity and variety in the scene; the act of reading and listening; credible representation of a crowd, forcibly varied in energy and postures, etc. See Diderot 1996a, p. 497.

24 'David's attitude towards allegory deserves a thorough study, like the marked taste of the artists, government, or the public for allegory during the Revolution' (Bordes 1983, p. 55, note 188, p. 109). On the other hand, David would use *allegory* in the decorations of revolutionary festivals, for example, in the Festival of Liberty (15 April 1792), with a float; at the Festival of Fraternity (10 August 1793), containing a figure of the people, under the features of Hercules. It was said that it represented 'The triumph of the French people, a project for the decoration of an opera, in which the people ... crush the tyrants under their float, escorted by a procession of martyrs of Liberty'; and, finally, in the Festival of the

true that, for this subject, *allegory* was not even considered. Abandoning such a device gave way to a move that earned the painter more than one judgement of malpractice, which, to this day, baffles most observers of the work.

Negative and Universal Grandeur

The picture presents an imbalance that stood out and surprised many. Above the heads of the deputies, there is an empty and immense geometrical space, which occupies practically half of the entire picture. On the sides, groups of spectators react in different ways to what they see below. They echo, at a different level, the behaviour of the deputies. At the core of the deputies' and audience's attention, there is a common denominator: the oath of President Bailly, in the centre of the lower scene.

President Bailly occupies the axis of the lower scene, but not the centre of the composition, which is left empty. With a raised arm and open hand, the president repeats the gesture-symbol of the speaker in Roman-Hellenistic sculpture. However, in the correlation of values, its function is subordinated to the abstract geometrical space, which occupies the largest area of the composition. In short, in the terms of the drawing, the gesture of the president works as an index, valuing the abstract space. Above the members of the Assembly, the empty abstract shape remains spatially hegemonic and is also highlighted by the presence of the people in the galleries, whose gestures function as volutes or ornaments of the open space.²⁵

Critique of Pictorial Reason

The imbalance adds tension to the composition and introduces deliberate *disproportion* between the void and the other elements of the composition,

Supreme Being (8 June 1794). A fake mountain represented the Olympus of philosophical Deism. See Michel 1988a, pp. 73–75; Sahut (ed.) 1988, pp. 150–153. See also Ozouf 1976. After the Thermidorian coup which saw his Jacobin friends perish, and nearly David too, he would resume neoclassicism in the immense painting *Les Sabines* (1799, oil on canvas, 385 × 522 cm, Paris, Louvre). For an unrealised idea of David, of using allegory in a painting commissioned by Napoleon, see Bordes 1983, p. 55, and n. 188, p. 109. On Bonapartist David, see, in this volume, 'Eighteenth Brumaire, the Fabrication of a Totem: Freud, David and Bonapartism'.

25 On this empty space, see Chimot 1990; see also Bordes 1983, p. 43.

which seems to almost fracture into two halves: the crowded lower half and the empty upper half, with no common denominator or logical link between them.

The painter asked a renowned architect to make a calculated drawing of that space, keeping the same disproportion in all versions and copies, including when, during the Directory regime, the government discussed the resumption of the project.²⁶ Therefore it is a deliberate compositional act. How not to relate it to the painter's refusal to resort to *allegory*?

One would not exist without the other. Indeed, the open and geometrical space effectively acts – instead of *allegory* – as a high point of the scene, the corollary of the pictorial discourse. Through this immense and, in short, abstract structure, the painter expresses a new value. What value?

Let us return to the problem at hand. The project deals with a new event, 'so great and so sublime', which 'no people' had ever known, according to David's letter to the Assembly.²⁷ He could not find the means to depict it using the rules of the Academy. He will need a new poetics, free from precepts. How to conceive this poetics?

Let us consider this problem from another perspective. The result, the presented drawing, shows that *disproportion* and disharmony form the values of the proposed project. They are concretely translated into the empty amplitude of the space with regard to the bodies, i.e. into the imbalance of the composition. Thus, before being a form, freedom emerges as negativity.

To what force can we attribute the deliberate subjection of harmony to *disproportion*, the transgression of the classical principle of composition, other than artistic freedom? And how to justify the latter except through the previous example of the deputies who took away from the king the privilege to talk and the prerogative to legislate?

Indeed, how to figure the first impact of freedom on the judicial and symbolic system of divine right, founded on tradition and therefore stable, except through the imbalance brought about by its denial? Unforeseen, the imbalance

26 See Bordes 1983, pp. 86–88.

27 'Oh my homeland! O my dear homeland! We will no longer have to go searching through the history of ancient peoples for worthy subjects on which to practice our brushwork. There was a lack of subjects for artists, who were forced to repeat themselves, now there will not be enough artists for all subjects. No, no people's history offers *anything so great, so sublime* as this Tennis Court Oath, which I am to paint. No, I will not have to invoke the gods of myths to ask them for inspiration. You, the French Nation: it is your glory that I mean to promulgate' (emphasis added). See David's letter to the National Assembly, on 5 February 1792. The letter was read to the Assembly by secretary Broussonet, on 7 February, and lively applauded. For the full document, see Bordes 1983, pp. 164–165. See also Michel 1988a, p. 65.

proposes a new aesthetic principle of an art that, before being celebratory, is dialogical and negative, and therefore free and critical.

Cosmic Order

What are the bases for such spatiality of subtly negative meaning when we look at David's previous paintings? The perspective of *The Tennis Court Oath* is certainly idealised. It highlights the visual culmination of the intellectual process of the French *Lumières*. Its particular and dated prism seeks to establish a connection with reality; to combine the values it postulates with the fact it narrates.

Thus, it lies in a historical inflection, like one of the last symbols of a certain universalist or idealist discourse – of the revolutionary bourgeoisie – which succumbed to the intensification of the Revolution. The fictitious unity of interests on which it rested is typical of a singular historical period that would be short-lived – so short-lived that it ended before the painting was concluded. The idea proved less durable than its visual realisation. What remains after the ideal prism of its genesis is fractured?

The previous notion of space, implied in *Oath of the Horatii*; in the double portrait of the Lavoisier couple (1788); and in *The Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of his Sons* (*Les Licteurs Rapportant à Brutus les Corps de ses Fils*, 1789), etc. is defined in solid and rational terms. With limited dimensions that do not exceed twice the human scale, such space frames the ethos and the individual actions that dominate the surroundings. Therefore, space emanates from the portrait subjects as their predicate. The spatiality derived from the character comes from the elegant English portraits of the second half of the eighteenth century, by Gainsborough and others. Their common denominator is the celebration of the owner and his property: land, animals, mansions, progeny, etc.

Instead, the spatiality of the new *Oath* denotes the critical overcoming of individual luxury. At first glance, it is already noticeable that a cosmic ambition guides the project – hence perhaps David's interest in the apocalyptic scene of the *Last Judgment* by Michelangelo, despite the latter's divergent meaning. For David, however, unlike his predecessor, the whole is immense, disproportional in relation to the parts. At the same time, it is clearly ordered and rational. What laws organise, and what principles support, this circularly arranged order?

Indeed, there is a new complex of shapes and values: nation, freedom, history, revolution – political notions highly valued at the time and related to

others of a clearly metaphysical meaning, such as nature and reason. How to represent universal and abstract forces without *allegorising* them?

The first meaning of the term revolution, in French or English, probably did not escape David, since it meant the rotation or circular movement of heavenly bodies in the cosmos. It was also widely known that Isaac Newton's *Principia* (1687)²⁸ had established an intrinsic correlation between the cosmic law of gravitation, centripetal acceleration, and circular motion.

Sublime Republican-Revolutionary

David depicts what he sees as the political and historical dawn of a new world founded on reason and nature, using a circular structure, which coincides with the diagram of a universal law established by the Newtonian cognitive revolution, a novelty from the previous century.

However, we still need to specify: in the picture, a certain imbalance or acceleration – gravitation or passion? – that draws all attention in one direction. The wind and the sum of enthusiasms, attentions, and gestures, all indicate a convergence.

What can this result be other than the elements of affection, corporality, and natural forces taken at the time to be indicative of the 'sublime'? In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Edmund Burke transposed the concept from ancient rhetoric into the modern debate, eliciting comments from Diderot, Kant, and Lessing. Indeed, it seems that, beginning with his aforementioned letter to the Assembly, David wanted to inscribe the signs of the sublime in the visual scene of the development of the nation.

Nevertheless, when we admit that that was the strategy of the painter, it is interesting to note that he implemented it independently of Burke, or rather in antithetical terms to the latter.

In fact, as a member of British society, where the accumulation of wealth was already regarded as a highest value, Burke attributes to the sublime – in its infinitude and formlessness – a fundamentally anti-social content, referring it to empirical subjectivity. In contrast, the observer of *The Tennis Court Oath*,

28 The full title of the work in which Newton establishes the laws of movement is *Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica* (London, 1687). Although the work caused many controversies with English colleagues – especially Robert Hooke (1635–1703) – Newton's international recognition grew on the back of this publication. For example, in 1707 he was elected an honorary member of the French Academy of Sciences.

the subject of the aesthetic experience, sees the sublime scene mediated by the eyes of the deputies and by the people in the galleries. He is therefore included in a reflexive spiral in which the experience of profound compassion is also that of rationality, simultaneously pointing towards itself and to the political whole as a unity. To look at oneself looking, in this situation, is indissociable from a compassionate thinking about the historical and the political; in short, from the practice of civic and revolutionary virtue.

The Promise and Its Opposite

In conclusion, today it is necessary to develop an interpretation of this work not only based on the 1791 project, but also taking into account the non-realisation of the painting as a moment indissociable from the drawing. Thus the drawing reveals, as a limit of a specially ideated process, the ultimate design of a social imagination denied by the historical process. Seen in its incompleteness, *The Tennis Court Oath* – for us consisting of a drawing – offers a promise of indivisibility and rationality, of sublimity and universality. Today it also speaks of their denial: the unrealised painting tells us of a modernity unfolded as its double, or as its opposite. It is evidence of a broken future or an unfounded present – proof of the constitutive structure of our present.

Marat by David: Photojournalism

The Will of the Dead

The death mask – a formalist might say – anticipates the photographic process in at least two of its functions. First, in the mnemonic function, which is as powerful as it is precise regarding the similarity between the image and referent. Second, in the indexical function as a remnant of physical contact. For this function, the mould for a cast and film (or these days a sensor) play similar roles as traces of physical contiguity.

So, did the photographic sign originate in the death mask? What is the role of the viewing subject in photography, then? By genealogy, is the photographic sign a carrier of the aristocratic desire to enjoy the privilege of an image of oneself (*ius imaginum*)?¹ Does the photographic act convey a desire for eternity, thus infusing the living with the will of the dead?

Let us interrupt this supposed investigation into the substance of the photographic process. Shot through with anachronisms, and in this case simulating a genre of metaphysical and formalist interpretation conducive to mythologies about languages, similar conjectures lend themselves to all manner of misconceptions. Constituted from a-historical arguments, they aim simply at the chimera of the essence of every language, or of the forms presumably inherent to them. In short, they seek to establish – according to the formalist premise of Fiedler's 'pure visibility' – the *ipseity* of each medium in extra-historical terms.

Plebeian Eros

By contrast, the historical formation of what we came to know as the photographic way of seeing is preceded, in its circumstances and in the materialist

1 In Greece, no physiognomic portraits were made. The only portraits produced were those of virtues represented through rhetorical conventions: courage, cunning, serenity, etc. The first strictly physiognomic portraits appeared in the funeral rites of the Roman patricians, and were directly derived from death masks. They were a class privilege. Polybius, in *The Histories* (book IV, 53), describes in detail the ceremonies in which the deeds of the deceased were narrated, in front of his funeral mask worn by his eldest son, while his descendants and onlookers cried. Apud Bandinelli 1970, pp. 75–76.

truth of historical development, by a reorganisation of forces in painting. From these forces the photographic gaze was elaborated to meet new social requirements. Thus, according to historical need, photography actually developed from the denial of Rococo and palatial painting, as a constructed and developed artefact, constituting the vehicle of such denial and of the desire invested in it.

As a working hypothesis, let us say that photography corresponded to an overdetermined historical invention or synthesis of multiple determinations, to a desire for reality, to a *non-aristocratic or even plebeian eros*.

The Device of the New Regime

In fact, Diderot prefigured the invention of the photographic sign, in his *Essays on Painting* (1765), when, against the academic exercise of drawing from life in a studio, he affirmed that 'every way of life has its own characteristic and expression'.² The *Essays on Painting* call for painting to become aware of this fact and to walk among the people on the streets.³

Thus, in its historical genesis, the photographic camera was the equivalent of a mobile studio. What is more, given the agility with which it *painted* and took advantage of the natural force of light, it presented an analogy with other ancient devices – in terms of the faculties of understanding, imagination, and perception engaged in the act of visualisation – to facilitate and potentiate human effort – when supported by simple techniques or devices such as ladders, wheels, or levers.

Seen in this way, photography appears as the manifestation of the desire for a *new kind of painting and sculpture* – that is, by a vision that seeks reality (or nature, as it was termed then) in the streets and urban spaces, beyond the church and the palace. Therefore, for a historical genesis of photographic desire one should look to the field of history, in which painting and sculpture engender an eminently urban and non-aristocratic synthesis.

Instantaneity and Historicity

It was no coincidence that years later Diderot's critical goal took shape: the painter Jacques-Louis David was apparently *driven* by a photographic desire

² See Diderot 1996a, p. 488.

³ See Diderot 1996a, pp. 470–471.

when he conceived *The Tennis Court Oath* (1791) – as if he already had the powers of photography. How did this happen?

Let us recall some of the steps the painter took in this direction, leaving behind both the innovative neoclassical lexicon he had introduced during the previous period, and academic norms.

Firstly, the adoption of a frontal axis – like a camera tripod taken to an unusual or unpredictable point of view – through making explicit the frank, direct, and symmetrical relation between two points of view, the spectator's and that of the deputy president of the Third Estate, Jean Sylvain Bailly. Given its relation with the background, this pivot implies that the spectator's gaze is *reflected* directly and crudely, like a flash of lightning rebounding from the wall at the end of the room.

Secondly, the appeal to signs that evoke instantaneity, like the wind blowing a curtain, and the lightning thundering against the monarchic coat of arms on the roof of the royal chapel, glimpsed through the window, in the background to the left; without forgetting the stance of Marat, as a journalist, in the background, *captured in the act* of taking notes on the balcony on the right. We should also note that this is probably the first visual record not only of a journalist in action, but also of a double of the painter-photographer, David, situated, as one might imagine, in front of the drawing, actually in the bottom, at floor level.

Thirdly, the invitation to all deputies, published by David in the newspaper *Le Moniteur*, so that each one of them could be individually portrayed at the painter's studio, in order to achieve a sufficiently credible collective scene with the facial features of all participants included.

Fourthly, there is the characterisation of the figures, who are depicted wearing contemporary clothes – contrary to the academic standard that established the use of classical garments in historical paintings. This was a new measure by David,⁴ and one that, despite disrupting norms, appeared logical in light of the aforementioned steps.

That said, this does not deny the power of the classical heritage, which manifests itself in the placement of the deputies, according to an evident triangular structure along a horizontal line, comparable to the reliefs on the pediments of Greek temples. However, it is more important to note the presence of new forces, because everything will be measured following their scale, including the conscious resumption of ancient elements; forces that not only belong to the

4 For a precedent with regard to the use of contemporary clothes in historical paintings, see the works of the Anglo-American painter Benjamin West.

political and symbolical scene of the nation's formation, but also announce a new visual and historical desire. Here, it is already a photographic desire – a living force combined with the new historical cycle – which proposes the economy of the visible and institutes a combination of instantaneity (new positions) and (Greek) historicity, which synthesises the scene and specific forces.

Marat Breathing His Last/ The Death of Marat *and the Mode of the Phenomenon*

However, the painting was not finished⁵ and the preparation of a new regime of the gaze, in relation to David's work, would only be consolidated in *The Death of Marat* (1793). David had originally, and not casually, called the painting *Marat Breathing his Last* [*Marat à son Dernier Soupir*].

Here the nascent photographic synthesis establishes itself as a new sensory and symbolic architecture, in which neither the inclusion of allegory nor the explicit reference to the classical, both pillars of the previous pictorial edifice, find any place. The reflexive operations to which such devices gave cause and which were typical of the genre of historical painting, like the mandatory reference to an imaginary Antiquity, disappear. Instead, the combination of instantaneity, or of the phenomenal existence and occurrence in perception, become the condition or way of being that is essential for objectivity and for any form of verisimilitude.

Ultimately, in the new symbolic economy, the exclusive route for every record of significance became the mode of the phenomenon. Only what exists in the very temporality of perception retains any value – this is the general law of a new knowledge-based order inseparable from experience. In an ever-changing world, photography became the officiating agent or the mark of existence.

In the sphere of painting, David was possibly the first to extract the consequences of the new secular law of knowledge – a law that presupposes mutual determination between cognition (in this case, of history) and experience – an interrelationship that the natural sciences had already established more than a century before.⁶

5 For more on the interruption of the painting, which according to the painter had then lost its historical meaning, see footnote 12 in 'The Hemicycle: The Image of the Nation-Form', in this volume.

6 Indeed, genre painting in the Netherlands and in France, with J. Baptiste Chardin, for exam-

Perception: Truth Value

In this way, painting converges with other forms of knowledge taking root, like other secularised practices, in the field of the experience.

In *Marat Breathing his Last/ The Death of Marat*, David found himself once again taken by the desire to capture a fleeting moment. In fact, he met the urgency of the nation that cried out for Marat, murdered by one aristocratic hand.⁷ To those who rallied to the cause of instantaneity, to the appeal of its evidence – just like today, as we all know well, an appeal always constructed by, and routinely emerging from, the modern professional shrewdness of the reporter, the lawyer, the policeman, the adman, etc. – there, precisely, the new decisive argument resided. It was the core of the force of *natural* persuasion, which the painter had intuited. The discovery was no small matter; likewise, it had considerable relevance for the Revolution, which in this way obtained a decisive point of support: the argument in favour of the value and therefore of the *historical immortality* of Marat, relied on the evidence of *instantaneity* and on the experience of perception.

In other words, David had to visually demonstrate the law of virtue: to ensure that Marat's value would live long in the memory of the citizens, to establish the equation through which eternity or immortality, as a form of supreme value, would correspond to virtue. This would be done through a symbolic exchange analogous with the mournful discourse of Pericles, recounted by Thucydides, which concerns the first Athenians who fell in the war against Sparta. Such a political goal was the first degree of significance pursued by this painting. In other words and *avant la lettre*, it was the goal that would be transposed and carried over 70 years later in the Baudelairean motto: 'to extract the eternal from the ephemeral'.⁸

How to turn the particularity of the situation of an individual stabbed while taking a bath into a totalising image of the body politic of the young nation? Put simply, in the urgency of a war effort – the rapacity of the neighbouring monarchies, urged on by emigrants – the pictorial response to the murder

ple, had already established the experience as a decisive reference for painting. However, the lower status of genre painting in the face of the historical genre, as the frequent use of conventions in genre painting, mainly in France, impeded a more effective valorisation of perception as an essential element of painting.

7 The murderess, Charlotte Corday, came from a minor aristocratic family and was great-granddaughter of the playwright Pierre Corneille; she had become involved with the Girondin circles.

8 Baudelaire 2002n, p. 694.

should combine the representation of the instant and the projection of the mnemonic function in reflexive conjunction with history. As such, it would foster a fighting attitude in the tradition of the tribune or 'friend of the people' (*ami du peuple*).

Fabricating the Eternal out of the Ephemeral

In short, the question was not limited to a technique of apprehending the instant in its basic form. Rather, from the point of view of the Revolution, it involved determining the purpose of the operation: to mould the instant according to a dimension that was neither particular nor fleeting, but political and enduring.

It is worth returning to the painting that Baudelaire, like a naturalist discovering a new species, classified 52 years later, as 'an unusual poem ... painted very quickly';⁹ the rapidity that, let us not forget, was missing in *The Tennis Court Oath* (interrupted in 1792), the quickness that foreshadowed the invention of photography ...

Meanwhile, to recover some of the intricacies of converting the instant into a revolutionary monument, and line them up against the perspective of an archaeology of photography, we need to recall that the elements of the scene were partly extracted from a visit paid by David, a Jacobin board member entrusted by the Convention to inquire about the health of Marat, to his friend on the eve of the crime. According to David's explanation to the Convention, the painting combines his memories of the last time he saw his friend alive with the circumstances of the murder.

Another important source for the painting was David's portrait sketch of Marat soon after his death, a form of death mask.¹⁰ A third source, mixed with David's personal memories, were the circumstances of the crime: David's interpretation of the way Charlotte Corday had entered Marat's bathroom, combined with the situation in which the murderess found him.

While in part imaginary, all these elements are presented as factual and therefore as observable. Consequently, each in its own way carries its own *instants* of realisation, presenting its irreducible phenomenal dimension.

9 Baudelaire 2002b, pp. 408–410. 'Le Musée classique du bazar Bonne-Nouvelle' was published in *Le Corsaire-Satan*, 21 January 1846 – exactly 53 years after the execution of Louis XVI.

10 See David, *Tête de Marat Assassiné* (1793).

It is true that these elements involve distinct moments of reality, but David synthesised them into a single scene – following Diderot's proposal that the painter should summarise a story in one scene that is instantly apprehensible at a glance¹¹ – and did so with the unique craft of the painter and advertiser of the Revolution. From this single scene, whose logic was graspable at a glance – but filled with many instants, a condensed extraction of different times – David obtained a visual machine or lever, a new economy of forces. Condensing the faculties of perception, imagination, and reflection, the synthesised visual material sufficed to project the observer from the position of witness of a contingent scene to 'objectifying' reflection within the larger circle of history; immortalising or eternalising reflection, which blasted open the 'continuum of history', as Benjamin would say.¹²

To *politicise the fleeting moment*, or to shift from witnessing unique and ephemeral things towards the formation of a general meaning, is the wish of every photograph intended to go beyond the private fetish of the mechanical relationship between a sensation and the click that generates an automatic image.

How did this painting open a passage from the 'transitory to the eternal'? How did David make it? First of all, the path, paved by the Revolution, did not just enable the 'spontaneist' and 'instantaneist' paintings of Géricault or the lithographs of Daumier; it also ended up in the great historic emergence of photography.

Hence, let us take *Marat Breathing his Last* as an invention that encompasses in new moulds a mode of thinking and the depiction of the fleeting moment. Its principle, which is the pillar of modern visual discourse about history, would be resumed by a large number of works, all sharing the same logic. Let us provide a short list: the sketch of *Marie Antoinette on the Way to the Guillotine* (1793), by David; *The 3rd of May 1808 in Madrid* (1814), by Goya; *The Massacre of Rue Transnonain* (1834), by Daumier; *The Execution of Maximilian* series (1867–1869), by Manet; almost all of Eisenstein's works; almost all of Capa's images; Korda's photograph, which immortalised the face of Che, etc.

11 'The painter has only one instant and he cannot encompass two moments or two actions simultaneously. There are only a few circumstances in which he does not threaten the truth nor is it inappropriate to call to the scene the instant that has already passed or to announce what is to come. A sudden catastrophe surprises a man doing his tasks; the catastrophe falls upon him, and he is still busy at work'. (In this case, the resemblance to Marat's murder is a mere coincidence; the passage from Diderot's essay was written in 1765, 28 years before the assassination). See Diderot 1996a, p. 496.

12 See theses xvi and xv in Benjamin 2005a, pp. 119–123; Benjamin 2005b.

And many others who drew and will still draw from the electrifying nectar of David's *Marat Breathing his Last*. Let us penetrate to the heart of this invention in order to closely examine its function and principle. Concerning the painting, Baudelaire accurately noted:

All these details are historical and real, just as in a novel by Balzac; the drama is there, living in all its lamentable horror, and by a strange tour de force which makes this work the masterpiece of David and one of the great curiosities of modern art, it has nothing of the ignoble or trivial about it. The most amazing in this unusual poem is that it was painted extremely quickly, and when one thinks about the beauty of the drawing, there is something which confuses the spirit. The work is the staff of life for strong men and the very triumph of the spiritual: as cruel as nature herself, this painting has all the savour of the ideal.¹³

Has the articulation between the transient and the undying, including the quickness of execution which constitutes historical photographs, ever been synthesised in more precise terms?

Let us return to the visual journey through different worlds devised by David, to observe point by point the mutation of a process in its apparent otherness, in 'eternity' in Baudelaire's words. Or to put it in more familiar terms, to observe the transfiguration of the eventual into the figure of objectivity, into visible form of history or dynamic condensation, as an image of a fleeting moment, of a certain correlation of forces. Let us return to the founding experience of *Marat Breathing his Last*.

Near and Far

In order to renew and reinvigorate the genre of historical painting imbued with exemplarity, David's work turns towards the sources of the genre that traditionally constituted its opposite: the Flemish-Dutch pictorial realism of everyday scenes and domestic environments, where every gesture, however small, is significant.

In the previous century in France, Flemish-Dutch painting underwent important developments in the work of the Le Nain brothers and Jean-Baptiste Siméon Chardin, a few decades before David.

13 See Baudelaire 2002b, pp. 409–410.

In face of the Flemish-Dutch tradition of genre painting and still life, Chardin introduced an ingenious fine-tuning of the determination of space and time. The presence of Descartes's analytic geometry is denoted in the spatiotemporal structuring of his pictorial scenes. While the Dutch represented space by paces, Chardin did so in inches or feet. Similarly, he sharpens the aesthetic awareness to the limit of instants, highlighting the precarious balance of decks of cards, the ephemeral life of a soap bubble, etc.

Chardin's knowledge forms part of David's assets. Thus, the arrangement of sheets of paper, the precise dimension of two quills and a dagger – hand-grasped tools – precisely delimit the spatiality of this historical painting, where everything is made and measurable by *hand*.

Thus, it is a psychophysical spatiality, defined (forgive the anachronism) 'phenomenologically', in the field of the physical action of the 'self'.

In effect, so often the chequered floor, the maps (encouraging a way of seeing from a distance) of Flemish paintings, call for a contemplative look, filled with religiosity, albeit combined with a love of everyday life.

Here, unlike the Flemish tradition on which the painting is partly based, there is a 'horizon-line' – the Renaissance instrument used to separate the earth from the sky – the horizontal structuring of the painting, combined with Marat's intimacy and vulnerability. This is the trace line and the line of the historical fact, which is anticipated and brought closer to the observer through the table/box/coffin – since here there is also an epitaph, with a dedication, which the painter *signed* and *dated* (year two).

Thus, this is a zone of the hand, established by tradition. But in this case, it appears strengthened, reinvigorated, and reinforced with new elements by David.

Here, the space of the hand is also articulated with the space of reason, a faculty, in this case, of historical interpretation, which provides the painting with its specific rigour and character, distinguishing it from Flemish tradition.

However, before we enter the major theatre of reason or historical reflection, it is important to identify the elements that, at one level or another, imply the hand as a concentrated symbol of human action in the scene. In addition to the instruments mentioned (quill, dagger, and paper leaves), the painting presents direct traces of manual action: writing and cutting, which are reciprocally determined here from the viewpoint of pictorial treatment. At a different level, the pictorial facture, the treatment of the pictorial material, especially of the extraordinary and modern chromatic field that sets the 'background' – treated as a surface – makes the painter's practice explicit, presenting this field as object of a *practice* that is as much physical as it is ethical and rational, in its geometricised and simplified determination.

In the context of the motif, of the event depicted, Marat's hand functions as a dramatic pole. It is highlighted as a dramatic sign by the slumped arm, but also in a fold in the green fabric, through a crease, and via the edge of the white fabric.

Thus, everything here converges and is measured by the scale of the hand and simultaneously points to the floor, contributing to the earthly and ephemeral definition of the painting and its materials: human actions and historical facts.

Put simply, in the scale of the hand, another kind of attention also emerges. This is a new historical phenomenon – psychophysical attention raised to the significance of a historical fact. This order of fact is vigorously summoned by the detail of the patch or pocket on the white fabric in the lower left corner of the canvas, or by the close-up (anachronism notwithstanding) that is offered, raised, and provoked as an observer's way of seeing situated, one could say, *very close* to the historical fact.

That said, one could affirm that in this pictorial arrangement and through several elements, a renewal of the painting of historical themes takes place.

Hand and reason, intimacy (of Marat's bath, for example, and of the visual close-up) and theatricality (evoked by the geometrical and rational drawing and by the positioning of Marat's body), the *ipseity* of the fact and its historical dimension, all these elements, in principle opposed and heterogeneous, are articulated to require a new kind of contemplation and historical reflection. This mediation through attention to detail eloquently calls the subject and the individual consciousness to take a stand.

Thus, at the summit of the depicted moment, and of the reach of the body, the aesthetic observer is also required, as a historical subject and by means of the reflection and theatricalisation of the event, to assume a position. What invites him to do so in this case? The powerful, geometrical, and austere drawing makes the painter/craftsman analogous to a legislator. Therefore, attention to the concrete handling is also posited as an ethical and rational act, a maxim, so to speak.

Bathing, reading, and writing, misleading with words, and stabbing, painting, and seeing – all actions establish themselves as simultaneously ethically and historically significant acts of the *self*.

Besides the lines and the drawing, the arrangement of colours, including systematisation and drama in its economy – one has only to look at the luminosity and chromatic contrasts – all involve the meticulous manipulation of the material, typical of the craftsman, with the will and reason of a legislator.

In this combination of systematisation and simplicity, drama and detachment, in the singular vibration of each of those qualities, there is an echo of

the prerogatives of new historical subjects, instituted by the new philosophy of natural law.

This is new history, because it is earthly, with no supernatural light; it is illuminated by human actions – history within reach of the hand, of the murderess, of the painter, and of the citizen alike.

New law, grounded in nature and not in theology.

New painting, because the picture makes a tabula rasa of the Rococo, of aulic Classicism and the Baroque, a new spatiality (short and direct), a new lexicon, nourished by Flemish bourgeois realism; thus, *Marat Breathing his Last* presents itself as establishing a new aesthetic era. This epoch is modern and classical-Republican, without infinity, shallow and stripped of metaphysics, yet steeped in ethics and in the urgent science of historical action.

The new object outlined here can best be illuminated by confronting this painting with two others that also exhibit a similar ambition of raised ethical and historical reflection: *The Lamentation of Christ*, in the Scrovegni Chapel (Padua), by Giotto; and the execution by firing-squad of *The 3rd of May 1808 in Madrid*, by Goya.

The stiff corpse of Christ, by Giotto, beyond the lines defining the masses, gathers gestures, looks, the attention of friends and disciples, and also wants to initiate an ethical and historical reflection. Giotto's Christ too is arranged as if in a theatrical play, urging the observer, as in a 'snapshot', toward a historical and ethical understanding – Christian, in this case – of the exemplary fact.

The sacrifice of Marat, in turn, depicted in close-up, tells us that this story, while an ethical and rational object, is also for better and for worse an object of human action.

Detail by detail, with austerity but also eloquence, the aesthetic observer becomes aware that doing, touching, seeing, reading, and speaking, just like making history, are his or everyone's prerogatives or 'natural rights'.

Confronting Goya's painting is similarly conducive to illuminating the peculiar power of David's painting. Thus, the astonishment and indignation that were figurative and mediated in Goya's work become in David's art (perhaps owing to the dynamic and peculiar historical moment in which he lived) directly lodged in the inner consciousness of the aesthetic observer. That is why he is as present and active as Charlotte Corday, his other, invisible in the painting. David is present as the painter – with the traces and the structure inherent to his craft. In this way, Romanticism, in its rational genesis, presents itself, questioning the observer as a 'self'.

Eighteenth Brumaire, the Fabrication of a Totem: Freud, David and Bonapartism

Illusion and Domination

In *The Future of an Illusion*, Freud makes an analogy between religious illusion and State illusion.¹ I will discuss such illusions in relation to the State-form in some paintings by Jacques-Louis David, made in the context of Bonapartism.

The imbrication of the issues of domination and illusion in Freud includes the 'image-idea' of the *totem* as a visual sign for the stratification of a new correlation of forces, emerging from the overthrow of the previous order. The reference case is the murder of the father, a kind of regicide by the primitive horde of rebellious sons.² New forces are awakened with rebellion, which either continue the struggle or stagnate. The latter occurs most frequently.

To freeze this correlation of forces, to end the revolution, was precisely the slogan of the Girondists in 1791. Let us set out a typology of historical desires: to put an end to the revolution was also the desire of the Thermidorian forces. This is also the case of recent interpretations of the Revolution.³

A portrait of Robespierre, as the leading figure of the Jacobins, would indeed be a totemic picture, a *halt* in the Republican process, as seen from the *sans-culotte* point of view. This is not to mention a portrait of the Supreme Being, requested by Robespierre from David in order to stop the progress of dechristianisation among the *sans-culottes*. However, the frenzied speed and fluency of the revolutionary process, at this moment, did not allow David to partake in these totemic projects.

However, if, conversely, the struggle proceeds and divides the victorious forces, then the contradictions become radicalised. In the latter context it is the notion of ongoing, unfinished, or even permanent revolution that predominates.

1 See Freud 2004, pp. 34–35.

2 See Freud 1986, pp. 172–173.

3 See Furet 1985.

Voluptuousness

This latter dynamic is what happened between 1789 and 1794 in the ‘voluptuous’ time of the Revolution. This was the term used by Baudelaire, in a text whose completion was thwarted by death. In the draft of the preface to the novel *Dangerous Liaisons* (1782) by Choderlos de Laclos, Baudelaire wrote: ‘The Revolution was made by voluptuaries’.⁴

The Conspiracy of the Equals, of Babeuf in 1795, after the coup of Thermidor, equally belongs to the domain of voluptuousness. Benjamin’s stance in delimiting the conditions favourable to the revolutionary outbreak in the text ‘On the Concept of History’ (1940)⁵ is also *voluptuous*.

In this typology of historical notions and desires, Baudelaire’s voluptuousness is in line with the *iskra* (the Bolshevik spark), with the messianic moment of Benjamin, and with Trotsky’s ‘permanent revolution’.

Freud and the Revolution

In what field then does Freud’s image-idea of the *totem* situate itself? The notion, which introduced the idea of a previous rebellion, concerns the obstruction of the revolutionary processes or collective historical *stases*. Its objective is the defeat and conclusion, and not the continuation, of the Revolution. The notion of *totem* can be applied to processes contrary to those evoked by Baudelaire, Trotsky, and Benjamin.

Does that imply an opposite point of view?

By no means. In other texts, Freud articulates (like the revolutionaries) the desire for the historical progress of humanity, which he attributes to Eros. Thus, he affirms that ‘our best hope for the future ... is that intellect – the scientific spirit, reason – may in process of time establish a dictatorship in the mental life of man’.⁶

Does the idea of the Revolution comprise an ‘illusion of progress’? It should be noted in passing that Freud’s idea of an incessant struggle between Eros and the death drive suggests a certain parallelism or even synchronicity with the Trotskyist notion of ‘permanent revolution’, based on incessant conflicts.

In short, is the revolution an ancillary illusion of the ideology of progress? Not for Freud. Like Kant in 1798, who perceived the meaning of the French

4 ‘La Révolution a été faite par des voluptueux ...’, in Baudelaire 20020, pp. 68, 1115–1116.

5 See Benjamin 2005b.

6 See ‘Sur une *Weltanschauung*’, in Freud 1984, p. 229.

Revolution,⁷ despite failures, as a clear sign of human progress, in 1932 Freud affirmed that: 'the overturn that took place in Russia ... seems, however, to be the forecast of a better future'.⁸

If, for Freud, religion and the State imply similar symptoms, inherent in neuroses and psychoses, then, by contrast, the desire for historical progress is associated with the scientific spirit and derives from Eros. What would then be the clinical picture of the illusion regarding the State? Did Freud develop an answer to this question? He did not, but the illusion of a State above social conflicts, as well as the illusion of a just and universal god, would most likely be implicit in any such clinical picture.

In fact, Freud did not intervene in the revolutionary debate. Clinical emergencies and scientific realism took precedence. Instead his spirit sought to analyse what already existed: the psychology of domination, war, etc. Thus, the notion of *totem* applies to the collective historical *stases*, notably libidinal, which are at the root of several symptoms. The 'return to order', after insurrection and regicide, marks a new regime of domination, which leads to the 'perpetuation of the will of the father' or the cult of the boss, etc.⁹

After twenty years of research, Freud applied his analyses of power to the study of monotheism, taking Zionism as a target. I will apply his conception here to Bonapartism and to David's painting. In this sense, I propose a distinction between two types of image created by David between 1791 and 1812: *voluptuous* and *totemic* images.

Voluptuous or Totemic Images

Totemic images are the ones we will discuss here. They are glacial or well-finished and signal the will of the father. They engender a taboo and have a funereal aspect. Such are the characteristics of Bonapartist images. The sketches of *totemic* images made between 1789 and 1794 were not finished (the project for *The Tennis Court Oath* [1791]¹⁰ and the allegory of the constitutional monarchy [1792]). The absence of portraits by David of the 'Incorruptible' (Robespierre), despite the alliance between them, is connected to the same contrast that opposes *totemism* and the continuation of the revolutionary processes.¹¹

7 See Kant 1965, p. 171.

8 See Freud 1984, p. 242.

9 See Freud 1986, p. 220.

10 See 'The Hemicycle: The Image of the Nation-Form' in this volume.

11 The same goes for the absence of a God revealed in the cult of the Supreme Being,

Conversely, according to the proposed typology, David's republican images are *voluptuous*. They poetically develop the *combinatoire* of the experiences of the 'delicious', the unfinished, and freedom, introduced by Diderot.¹² Such images do not disseminate a taboo, but rather propagate the *élan* brought about by the revolutionary process.

This is the case in the poignant paintings about the revolutionary martyrs and in the portraits of Madame Pastoret and Madame Trudaine (or Chalgrin),¹³ which are *voluptuous* images where the forms float above the process of painting and do not hide its dynamism and spontaneity. In them, the outpouring of brush strokes, materials, and affection reaches a peak.

Let us return to *totemic* images. According to Freud, the *totem* functions like a dam; it installs ambivalence: it cancels the preceding order and takes on the culpability of its extinction. But let us go straight to what Marx said about the ambivalence of the Bonaparte effect in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, that it was Napoleon and others ('these heroes of the former French Revolution, as well as the political parties and massed crowds alike'), who 'accomplished the business of the day in Roman costumes and with Roman phrases: the unfettering and establishing of modern *bourgeois* society'. It was Napoleon who 'created within France the conditions in which free competition could be developed, land sales from estates could be exploited, the unfettered industrial productive power of the nation could be utilised'.¹⁴

The Taboo of Brumaire

Let us restate such findings in terms of *totem* and taboo. After the coup of 18 Brumaire, the Consulate assimilated the regicide and the assassination of the Republic and of the Revolution. Politically, such a mixture seems tortuous and confusing. Economically, however – and this is what matters – it was straightforward. Brumaire led directly to the privilege of private property and sacral-

for which David conceived the celebration of Floréal Year II, as proposed by Robespierre.

12 See in the *Encyclopédie* the entry 'Delicious [Déllicieux]' by Diderot, and also its use in *Salons*, of the same author. Diderot envisages possibly something similar to the Kantian notion of the free play of the understanding and imagination in the natural subjective activity, according to Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790).

13 See David, *Portrait de Madame Chalgrin, dite Madame Trudaine* (1791–1792); David, *Portrait de Madame Pastoret* (1791–1792).

14 See Marx 2002, p. 20.

ised or *tabooised* monetised land ownership. It also irrevocably sanctioned the status of so-called 'national property', confiscated from the emigrant nobility and then auctioned. It legitimised and protected the new owners.¹⁵

If revolutionary expropriations were consolidated by monetisation, the new order, simultaneously, encompassed all kinds of revivals and asymmetries to compensate for the extinction of old privileges: amnesty for emigrants, a return to the Gregorian calendar and to slavery in the colonies, and an iron fist over the demands of workers.¹⁶

Freud synthesised the effect of the *totem* through the dialectics of drive renunciation, due to taboo, and the drive discharge found in festivities. The order/disorder ambivalence of the *totem*-Bonaparte can be defined as follows: in France, respect for property and currency; abroad, primitive accumulation or war. In painting, this duality was translated into two kinds of images: those of the administrator/planner, and those of the hero.

Glaciation and Business

David's *totemic* painting, despite his previous affiliation to the Revolution, comes from the Thermidorian Reaction.¹⁷ The brush strokes that subjected everything to the voluptuousness economy are replaced by 'glacial' and 'specular realism'.¹⁸ Rousseau's voluptuousness gives way to the detachment of Adam Smith, whose 'impartial spectator', fighting against the passions, has been compared to the *super-ego*. I would rather compare it to an inner panopticon.

The 'impartial spectator' is associated with an 'invisible hand', which advances (albeit unconsciously) society's interests.¹⁹ The model adopted by David is that of the British portrait. The refinement of the new style offers the Thermidorian bourgeoisie a duplication of their mask. David's cold and calculated painting functions as a mirror. This glacial art has the same qualities that the bourgeoisie had introduced in their business dealings. And this style will be useful to Napoleon.

15 See Godechot 1951, pp. 664–665.

16 See Bertaud 1973, pp. 21–26.

17 See David's letters to Boissy d'Anglas (26 Brumaire year III/ 16 November 1794); and Mme. Huin (23 September 1795), in Sahut 1988, pp. 142–144.

18 See Michel 1988a, p. 110.

19 See Smith 1976a, pp. 184–185; see also Smith 1976b, p. 456.

Canvas Totem

The portrait of *Bonaparte Crossing the Saint-Bernard Pass* (1800–1801) depicts the *totemic* function according to the wishes of the First Consul.²⁰ Serenity before an obstacle is proof that the hero is unparalleled. The theme of the crossing or overcoming of space is immediately transcendent. Historical content pours over into myth.

Only the Führer (Freud's term) – or the father-legislators, like Moses – play a *totemic* role. It was said that the crossing of Saint-Bernard was made possible by an ancient route forged by Roman troops. The caption, engraved on rocks in the foreground, translates the genealogical voice of the father: 'Bonaparte, Hannibal, Karolus Magnus'. It opposes the fraternal and *voluptuous* voice of the dedication to Marat in 1793: 'to Marat, David'.

According to Freud, the *totemic* function takes place in ambivalence. We have already situated the *totem* in the economic sphere; now, let us revisit the political sphere. A sentence by Bonaparte illustrates, a few years later, the painting's regime of ambivalent enchantment: 'I am the Revolution ... The Revolution is over [*je suis la Révolution ... La Révolution est finie*]'.²¹ The back-and-forth of the sentence, which cuts both ways, is inherent in the double valence of the *totemic* function. This is how the initial affirmation of regicide is combined with another: the era of the regicidal republic was over.

The epilogue is inherent to the politics of culpability. Such a rhetorical spiral encompasses the majestic *self* of absolutism, which is the heir of the past. Everything is done with the upward force of a spiral that grows in the shape of a cone in the painting. In the vertigo of helicoidal assent, the distinct cases of regicide, of Thermidor and Brumaire, join, accumulate, and coalesce.

The witchcraft involved consists in considering these upheavals *in abstracto*, without contradictions or conflict. The perverse progression fuses the mnemonic traces of voluptuousness and glaciation; it indistinctly merges the drives of life and death or renunciation.

Will the painting fulfil the same function? How does the knowledge of the *totemic* master materialise?

In painting, through the upward movement synthesised in the swirling cape around the First Consul, signs of innovation and tradition are combined. Two motifs go back to the paintings of the Ancien Régime and the Revolution, based

²⁰ See Wildenstein 1973, p. 141.

²¹ Apud Bertaud 1973, p. 6.

on ideas from the French *Lumières*: the theme of the oath – see *The Oath of the Horatii* (1785) and *The Tennis Court Oath* (1791) – and the *topos* of omniscient or panoptic visibility, then in vogue.

What is Seeing For?

The motif of total visibility inspired the ellipse-shaped design of the Chaux salt-works, commissioned by the king in 1774 from architect Ledoux.²² The paradigm of the amphitheatrical or elliptical form, suitable for the panopticon, was also manifested in projects by other architects.²³ The drawing of *The Tennis Court Oath* indicates the same influence, implying the form of a hemicycle.

From the lyricism of Rousseau²⁴ to the watchful eye of Bentham – the inventor of the panopticon for humanising prisons – much gravitated, as Foucault notes, around such a *topos*. The ideal of absolute visibility, which aimed at a ‘transparent society, visible and legible in each of its parts’,²⁵ entailed many facets.

In David’s *voluptuous* paintings, the pictorial ‘metopes’ of the three *martyrs of liberty* (Lepeletier, Marat, and Bara), whose visual proximity is shocking, are tributary of such an ideal.²⁶ In the face of Marie-Antoinette drawn in the open cart of those condemned to death, David’s panoptic science responds to the general scopic desire to watch the execution of the enemy of the nation.²⁷ Thus,

22 See Foucault 1994a, p. 191. See also Jacques and Mouilleseaux 1989, p. 18.

23 In 1769 Gondoin planned an amphitheatre for the anatomy course of the School of Medicine of Paris. In the 1780s Boullée designed large amphitheatres in order to ‘meet moral and political perspectives’, ‘induce good behaviour’ (*Essai*, 120), and aiming to reach 300,000 ‘spectator citizens’, ‘at the same time objects and subjects’. See Jacques and Mouilleseaux 1989, p. 18.

24 See Rousseau 1967, pp. 233–234, 248. See also Starobinski 2006, pp. 116–121; see also Fortes 1997, pp. 181–184.

25 ‘I would say Bentham was the complement to Rousseau ... Bentham is both that and just the opposite. He poses the problem of visibility, but thinks of a visibility organized entirely around a dominating, overseeing gaze ... Both add to each other and combine into a working whole, Rousseau’s lyricism and Bentham’s obsession’. See Foucault 1994a, p. 195.

26 See David, *Marat Breathing his Last* (1793) and idem, *The Death of Bara* (1794). Insofar as is known, the painting on Le Peletier was destroyed by his daughter. See also ‘Marat by David: Photojournalism’ in this volume.

27 See David, *Marie Antoinette on the Way to the Guillotine* (1793).

the passionate coldness of the drawing prefigures the visual systematisation, by Bertillon, of the anthropometric identity of criminals in the nineteenth century.

Under the Gaze of the Totem

If the same ideal of visibility is applied to the painting of *Bonaparte Crossing the Saint-Bernard Pass*, the question that arises (besides the general's exhibitionism) is: *who* is watching *whom* in the scene? It is certainly no longer the 'general of the great nation', according to the note, and, looking into another horizon, in the effigy (1797–1798) sketched and annotated by David on a small piece of paper.²⁸ It is no longer the gaze into the distance, according to the tradition of imperial images, in the unfinished oil portrait of the conqueror of Italy (1797–1798).²⁹

The Bonaparte after the Eighteenth Brumaire, painted by David, has a new and involving gaze.³⁰ Baudelaire considered him 'the only poetic and grandiose Bonaparte of France'.³¹ Anything *grandiose*, said Freud, has this character because it recalls the will of the father.³² Eye to eye, with the intensity of personal appeal, the image directly challenges the observer. The imperative power – of *totemic* nature – manifests itself in the leader's gaze.

Such is precisely the power of taboo. Freud compares it to the 'categorical imperative'.³³ However, unlike the Kantian imperative, which is abstract and somehow magnetised by the 'starry sky',³⁴ in the painted Bonaparte the strength of the *thou shalt* becomes a concrete and singular incarnation. What are the consequences? An individual like this, turned hero and whose gaze touches the viewer like a panoptic device, is nothing but the *ego* as image, in an omniscient position, standing as an ideal ego, of general value.³⁵

28 David, *Étude de Profil du Général Bonaparte* (1797–1798). For a reproduction, see Bordes 2005a, p. 77.

29 See David, *Portrait du Général Bonaparte* (1797–1798).

30 See *Bonaparte Crossing the Saint-Bernard Pass* (Malmaison) and other versions of the work (Versailles, Musée du Château; Berlin, Charlottenburg museum).

31 See Baudelaire 2002b, p. 410.

32 See Freud 1986, p. 224.

33 See Freud 1993, p. 108.

34 See Kant 1960, pp. 172–173.

35 In 'Psychologie des foules et analyse du moi' (1921), Freud compares the fabrication of a Führer with the establishment, reproduced within a group, of a particular individual as an

In contrast, the identification promoted by the direct visual relationship subjects every spectator, as an individual and solitary being, to the imperious gaze. Thus, it engenders a *reverse angle*, like Hollywood movie dialogues.

In *voluptuous* paintings, one felt part of the scene. Here, on the contrary, one is left on this side of the mirror, in the submissive position of a spectator. In short, the gaze of the hero crystallises the projective and identity dynamic through which the spectator's ego becomes split. The spectator identifies with the hero by projecting a reified gaze upon him.

At the same time, the other half of the spectator, weakened by the splitting, finds itself rejected by the first, which is actually nothing but an image or a projected false position. The effect of the phenomenon is similar to the effect of the cunning operation aimed at causing general identification through the dissemination and popularisation of the first name of the emperor – whose family name conversely dispersed the identity-effect in a patronymic of foreign appeal or the unfamiliar.

The Napoleonic self ultimately makes its origins diffuse by presenting a kind of screen-image that is accessible to all selves susceptible to splitting and, therefore, to submitting to external forces. Thus, in painting as in language, this process is about building the phantasmagorical *ipseity* or *selfhood* of a unique ego or ideal.

The split ego of the spectator, who, on the one hand, identifies with the emperor – and, on the other, finds himself in the *reverse angle* situation, feels rejected as an insufficient being – is therefore deprived of political relations. The pledge made by only one man, like the one of *Bonaparte Crossing the Saint-Bernard Pass*, comes without a social contract. It is founded only on a specular effect. It suffices to compare it with the collective oath of *The Tennis Court Oath*.

In the 1791 drawing, the centre of gravity indicated by the looks and gestures, among which are the raised hand of president Bailly, stressed the immensity of the void, above the heads, disproportionately large in comparison to the rest of the composition. David undoubtedly wanted to envisage a cosmic grandeur such as the Newtonian law of gravitation,³⁶ in order to strongly evoke the founding act of the nation. The universal and abstract grandeur of 1791, auspicious and collective, welcomed by the circular arrangement of gestures, is replaced in 1800 by the imperious look of the hero, who goes hand in hand with the conquering gesture, challenging the viewer in categorical terms: *Thou shalt*

ideal image of the ego. See Freud 2008, pp. 218–222, para. 10–11. See also André, 'Préface', in Freud 2004, pp. XII–XIII.

36 See 'The Hemicycle: The Image of the Nation-Form', in this volume.

follow me! The result is an equestrian panopticon that opposes the petrified gaze of the viewer on foot and the gaze of the infantry.

The figure of the painting thus emerges silhouetted against the sky – which is actually absent from the *voluptuous* paintings and reappears here, like an aura involving tutelary figures. The panoptic effigy of Napoleon staring at the pedestrian onlooker seizes not only the spirit, but also the body of the viewer.

Besides, viewers at the time knew full well that riding skills derive more from the action of the legs, pressing upon the animal, than the handling of the reins. Contrary to what David had done with the leg hanging down in the equestrian figure of Count Potocki³⁷ – in this case he painted the rider loosening the reins while the painting exalts muscular definition highlighted by breeches, which operate here like the *wet cloth* of Greek Attic reliefs (or the draperies so dear to Poussin). In the effigy of *Bonaparte Crossing the Saint-Bernard Pass*, the arrow-shaped leg of the rider triumphs over gravity, prompting the horse to move. Breeches [*culottes*] are an emblem of the owners' power. They dialectically evoke their opposite, namely the legs of the foot soldiers, occluded by the topography in the background: soldiers coming from the revolutionary mass of the *sans-culottes*, who here appear to be trained and disciplined, in a word, 'panopticised'. The contrast between the central equestrian figure and the pedestrian miniature figures translates the difference between the 'haves' and 'have-nots'.

Counter-Totems

The Tennis Court Oath evoked a collective triumph. *Bonaparte Crossing the Saint-Bernard Pass*, in turn, celebrates the triumph of the individual over nature, mediated by property. If, in short, the poetry of realism emerges from traversing the scene or image in search of truth, then it is in the background of this painting, where its poetry resides, discrete and almost imperceptible. It appears in the effort of these soldier figures, a motif that – as Benjamin would say in his theses about history – resists like a whisper waiting for redemption.

Let us quickly go through the scene of *The Coronation of Napoleon and Josephine* (*Le Sacre de Napoléon*, 1806–1807). The principal axis of the painting, which clearly opposes the axis of *The Tennis Court Oath*, functions as a disclosure. It suggests to the eye, excluded from the main scene, the critical construction of a transversal or non-specular view.

37 See David, *Portrait du Comte Stanislas Potocki* (1781).

The Totem of Everyone

In the meantime, let us return to the anti-*totemic* history of Marx, who comments on the disappearance of the *Roman* heroes of 89 and 92:

Once the new social formation was established, the antediluvian colossi, and along with them the resurrected Romans – the Brutuses, the Gracuses, the Publicolas, the tribunes, the senators and Caesar himself – all vanished. Amidst a dreary realism bourgeois society produced its true interpreters and spokesmen in the Say's, Cousin's, Royer-Collard's, Benjamin Constant's and Guizot's; its real commanders were in the counting houses.³⁸

The image of the emperor in his office at the Tuileries both opposes the atmosphere of encampment inherent in *Bonaparte Crossing the Saint-Bernard Pass* and completes the *totemic*/panoptic device. The painting was commissioned by the marquess of Douglas, a Scottish admirer of the emperor.

David often emptied the area around his models in order to accentuate the reflexivity of the painting. Here, instead, visual elements are abundant and detailed throughout the painting. The office, the objects, the tiny facial details, and the fat statesman in white breeches, are all presented with accuracy.

By painting a standing figure, David touches a common feeling. The intention, the painter explains to his Scottish client, was to reveal the emperor in his most 'usual appearance, at work'.³⁹ To exalt the work of the planner is to directly ratify the social division of labour. The image of power, which had long been that of the rentier or the idle boss, now appears linked to the image of work.

The scene is informal: we see all the details of the body and the environment as if in close-up. The intimacy of the situation multiplies the appealing power that once was concentrated in the eyes of the hero, while the rest appeared distant. Here, in turn, everything appears crowded together. A masterful set designer, David had created in 1791 the amphitheatrical setting of the assembly, which since then has become the standard for all parliaments, except that of the United Kingdom, which accepts the coexistence of both Parliament and the Monarchy. At the Tuileries, David staged the office of the statesman-planner. The other effigies of Napoleon in his office, by Ingres or Greuze, are simple

³⁸ Marx 2002, p. 20.

³⁹ Apud Schnapper and Sérullaz 1990, p. 476.

paintings or just aulic art, while in contrast, the *totemic*/hypnotic/panoptic power of David's painting is highlighted by the precision of the pendulum – absent in the first studies for the work. Added later, the pendulum maximises the determining effect of the situation, like a penetrating close-up.

The pendulum indicates precisely four o'clock, David notes in his letter to Douglas, the hour at which the emperor stops his night labour to review the troops. The transparency of the image, which foreshadows the reality show TV genre, produces its exact opposite. The face that combines 'bonhomie, cold-bloodedness, and penetration'⁴⁰ – David also notes – scrutinises all and everyone, while at the same time it seems to welcome all into the office. And it is an automaton (the clock) that appropriates the symbolic guardian role of the imperial eagle.

This is how the planner's gaze doubles in his own way the clock quadrant: he controls everything. This machine-eye is a *totem*: the canvas synthesises the historic shift in the ways of exercising power, replacing the privileges and symbols of sovereignty by the homogeneity of the government of the self, which self-reproduces as a workforce mirroring the *totemic* will.⁴¹

So, the subject of vision, the French *Lumières* ideal, transferred his dream of omniscience to the reified image. So, the black sun of the panopticon rises within individual consciousness. Reciprocity of vision was what was promised. But when everything becomes visible, what triumphs is a full circulation of images or the metamorphosis of everything into abstraction.

Bentham's *Panopticon* and the empire merge in the administration of oneself. To see and to be seen converge into one another: universal conversion into the value-image or synthesis of the other and of oneself into images of value. Life transformed into image-forms is all that remains from this symbolic exchange, besides the misery of the world – or of administered life, as we well know!

40 See *ibid.*

41 Interestingly, an article in the Brazilian newspaper *Folha de São Paulo*, as if to prove that David's finding, of replacing the eagle by the clock, remains on the agenda: 'The hours of meetings in New York City Hall are now – literally – numbered. By a decision of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, timers are being installed in meeting rooms to increase productivity at work. ... At the beginning of the meeting, a button is pressed and participants can observe (the timer is digital with large numbers) how much time has elapsed since the beginning of the meeting./ According to Stu Loeser, the spokesman of the mayor, the suggestion of clocks was made by a friend of Bloomberg who works in the private sector. In his company, timers allegedly reduced the duration of meetings by 20 %'. See Fagundes 2011.

Remains of Voluptuousness

Exile and Interdict

David's paintings from the revolutionary cycle occupy a secondary place in French museums. These canvases were made during the 'cultural revolution'¹ born of the alliance in years I and II between the power of the revolutionary civic committees and the popular sections with the Jacobin middle bourgeoisie.²

In addition to their museal exile, the republican canvases were also historiographically downgraded.³ That is, subject to the notorious political interdict – which also reaches the regicidal Jacobins such as Marat, Robespierre, Saint-Just, still deprived of state honours (although they were the founders of the republic-form in France) – an aesthetic veto is imposed. This is justified by the apparent unfinishedness of those canvases, unlike David's neoclassical, Thermidorian, Bonapartist, etc., paintings.

1 See Bianchi 1982, pp. 120–121.

2 After the Thermidor, the painter himself took preventive measures against the discomfort and hatred caused by his canvases from the revolutionary period, covering them with paraffin. See Delécluze 1983. The destruction of the portrait of deputy Lepeletier by the subject's own daughter, who bought the work at auction primarily to destroy it, dates back to the period immediately following the death of the painter, exiled in Brussels (1826). Today, *The Death of Bara* (*La Mort de Bara*) remains in a small provincial museum, in a poorly visited room (during my visit on a Saturday morning, the room's windows were closed; and the guards seemed surprised at the visitor's wish to examine that specific painting). In fact, according to common sense, it is just a sketch or less than that. The portrait of *Madame Charles-Louis Trudaine* (*Portrait de Madame Chalgrin, dite Madame Trudaine*) is in the Louvre, but in a secondary room, not on the main floor, where other pre-1789 or post-Thermidor works by David are prominently placed.

3 See, for example, the judgements about the unfinished canvases in the catalogue of the pictorial celebrations of the bicentennial of the republic, organised by Schnapper and Sérulaz 1990; see especially pp. 278–279 (116. *Portrait de Louise Pastoret*); pp. 280–281 (117. *Portrait de Louise Trudaine*); and pp. 289–291 (122. *La Mort de Bara*).

Spark

In fact, few studies broke the siege⁴ against the regicidal republic and the *sans-culotte* culture. Let us join, then, together to break the siege against the regicidal republic! The resort to the notion of 'voluptuousness' [*volupté*], formulated by Baudelaire in connection with the notion of revolution, opens new perspectives. Baudelaire conceived this idea briefly, right before the collapse that would lead to his death.

Thus, in preliminary notes for the preface to a republication of the epistolary novel *Liaisons Dangereuses* (1782) – by Choderlos de Laclos, written when the Ancien Régime was already endangered – Baudelaire affirmed: 'the revolution was made by voluptuaries'.⁵

What is the meaning of such insight? Today, individual exercises of voluptuousness mostly take place via narcotics and consumerism. The voluptuousness for revolution evoked by Baudelaire, in turn – a collective and public voluptuousness, related to making history, to overthrowing regimes and imagining other social orders – the voluptuousness of the 'spring of the peoples' – such a frenzy is difficult to understand, from outside the whirlwind ...

The enigmatic content of Baudelaire's note is related to David's canvases under discussion. The vertiginous historical pace of the Revolution evades our perception and modes of understanding ... However, yet another of Baudelaire's observations – this time concerning the speed with which David's *Marat Breathing his Last/ The Death of Marat* was made – highlights the same problem:

All these details are historical and real, just as in a novel by Balzac; the drama is there, living in all its lamentable horror, and by a strange tour de force which makes this work the masterpiece of David and one of the great curiosities of modern art, it has nothing of the ignoble or trivial about it. What is amazing in this unusual poem is that it was painted very quickly, and when one thinks about the beauty of the drawing, there is something which confuses the spirit.⁶

4 Examples of exceptions in this regard are: Dowd 1948a; Bianchi 1982; Michel and Sahut 1988; Foissy-Aufrère 1989; Clark 1999a, pp. 15–53; Clark 1994, pp. 243–307.

5 ('*La Révolution a été faite par des voluptueux*'). Baudelaire 20020, p. 68.

6 ('Tous ces détails sont historiques et réels, comme un roman de Balzac; le drame est là, vivant dans toute sa lamentable horreur, et par un tour de force étrange qui fait de cette peinture le chef-d'oeuvre de David et une des grandes curiosités de l'art moderne, elle n'a rien de trivial ni d'ignoble. Ce qu'il y a de plus étonnant dans ce poème inaccoutumé, c'est qu'il est peint

Would only the readiness and quickness of a cine-camera be able to capture the frenzy of the revolution? In effect, Benjamin, in his theses about history, reflects on the general difficulty of capturing an image of the past, which 'flits by',⁷ while proposing a dialectical deciphering or interpretive redemption,⁸ decisive for historical materialist interpretation.⁹

Survival

In fact, David's revolutionary painting lies very far from us, contemporaries of the so-called 'end of history' (to refer to Fukuyama),¹⁰ and at an impenetrable or impassable distance from the historical material of the painter. Let us begin by acknowledging this. In effect, his Thermidorian painting is easier to understand: take the two portraits of the Sériziat couple, in plain view in the great hall of the Louvre, they were destined to occupy major positions in French painting and nurtured, for instance, the best of Ingres like the *Portrait of Monsieur Bertin*.

The Sériziat portraits (1795), made a few months after the 9 Thermidor, delineate the painter's refusal of what had constituted the 'cultural revolution', or perhaps they shape what could be called David's 'escape plan'. From that point on, he was a declared supporter of Thermidorian reason.

'Self-criticism' or cunning – who can decipher his transformation? The biography of the author is of no interest here;¹¹ rather, let us examine the substrate of a new way of painting, conceived by the craftsman in a pioneering and masterful way. The first signs of David's 'self-criticism' date from his time in a prison cell in Luxembourg. It was the second time the painter had been placed under arrest in Thermidorian times. In the first prison (Fermes Générales, on Rue de Grenelle Saint Honoré, near the Louvre), where he had been taken on 15 Thermidor (2 August 1794), upon his reappearance four days after the coup of 9 Thermidor (27 July 1794), David painted a self-portrait ... By this point about

avec une rapidité extrême, et quand on songe à la beauté du dessin, il y a là de quoi confondre l'esprit'). Baudelaire 2002b, pp. 409–410. Published in *Le Corsaire-Satan*, 21 January 1846 (it is possible that the date was not coincidental; it corresponds precisely to the 53rd anniversary of the execution of Louis XVI).

7 Benjamin 2005b, p. 40.

8 See Benjamin 2005b, pp. 29–30.

9 See Benjamin 2005b, p. 37.

10 See Fukuyama 1992.

11 For David's biography, see Delécluze 1983.

100 (106, it is said) of his companions, the main Jacobins and government leaders of the Mountain, had been guillotined. David gave the picture to a visitor, a former pupil, commenting that it would be the very last image of himself ... with his head still on his shoulders.¹²

Scaffold

The pale and yellowish light against the colourless background, amid which can be seen the figure of the painter, probably appears under the traumatic influence of the Thermidorian terror. However, this does not detract from the haughtiness observable in his facial expression, this attitude is combined with the stunned look of life cut short. In this light, David depicts himself as a 'new man', that is, close to nature and, with brushes and palette in hand, as a painter.¹³

In effect, the self-portrait with 'a lost gaze', as it is known¹⁴ (perhaps that of the portrayed, but certainly not of the painter, who knew very well what he was doing), presents him rejuvenated in contrast to the David who attended liberal bourgeois meetings dressed with the refinement and lassitude of a gentleman.¹⁵ Faced with impending death, David establishes himself, for posterity, as 'close to nature': displaying a juvenile attitude, hair *au naturel*, simple clothes ... The painting itself with its facture in progress vibrates with the truth of the moment, with the possibility of imminent interruption ...? Is this tragic awareness of the ephemeral one hint of the lust for revolution?

The self-portrait shows no signs of resignation or 'self-criticism', since its pictorial frugality is similar to that of the canvases of the revolutionary cycle. Nor can one distinguish any signs of renunciation in the painting made shortly after, except of the peremptoriness of death: the autumnal grey of an aerial view – a corner of the Luxembourg gardens,¹⁶ visible from the second cell to which David had been transferred in September.

¹² See Michel 1988a, p. 96.

¹³ See Michel 1988a, p. 93; see also Clark 1994.

¹⁴ See Michel 1988a, p. 93; see David, *Autoportrait*.

¹⁵ See *ibid.*

¹⁶ See David, *View of the Luxembourg Gardens*.

Salvation

Signs of denial or self-criticism are slow to be actualised in painting. They are preceded by words. These come in a letter dated 26 Brumaire year III (16 November 1794), written to deputy Boissy d'Anglas. Mature arguments, typical of a strategy of conduct, are combined with general reasoning revolving around a new key for art, which implies a new historical process to which the painter seems to wish to belong.

David and Boissy had known each other since the early times of the Revolution of 89, then under the hegemony of the *bourgeoisie censitaire*. But D'Anglas, unlike David, had not followed the Jacobins' process of radicalisation, and now had become one of the strong men of the new anti-Jacobian order. President of the Thermidorian Convention and a fierce defender of freedom of prices – and therefore much admired by the wealthy classes¹⁷ – he had been dubbed by the people *Boissy-Famine*.¹⁸ For David, who writes him in a confessional tone, he is now a valuable ally.

The letter holds historical and objective extra-biographical interest.¹⁹ It involves an aspect which will be typical of the new regime for the arts after the Thermidor: the configuration of art and of the creator as special forms or social 'fetishes', to use anthropological terms that Marx and Freud would make current and widely applicable.

As for David, who during the Revolution presented a very different discourse, the letter involves a 180-degree turn. It invokes dedication to art, hypostatised and deified as a true salvific phantasmagoria, as a means of protection. In a similar way, the new David claims for himself the role of artist as a mysterious being, of a different nature: exalted and passionate, sensitive and eccentric compared with the disciplined and judicious *honnête homme*.²⁰

17 See Soboul 2005a, pp. 127–128.

18 The terms 'Boissy-Famine', or the homophonous popular saying 'bois-ci famine', sound almost like 'try this famine' in French.

19 See David 1988b, pp. 142–143.

20 The term '*honnête gens*' (honest people) was widely used over the course of the Revolution and the different meanings it carried are in their own way illustrative of the phases of the revolutionary process. The term was initially recorded by Furetière as 'a good man, a gentleman, with cosmopolitan airs, who knows how to live'. In 1775, in turn, Rétif de la Bretonne used the term to designate all rich people (*Le Paysan Perversi*, 1775). Similarly, in 1789 and 1790, the term designated the liberal bourgeoisie favourable to the Revolution, but contrary to popular or *sans-culotte* violence. In the discourse of 1 April 1791, in turn, Robespierre innovated by using the term to designate 'the most vile and corrupt'. The

The term 'sensitive soul', which David establishes as a link between d'Anglas and himself, unfolds in two complementary directions: the protective bourgeois: first, a 'true friend of the arts', the only one 'who is able to appreciate in its fair value the heart and head of an artist'; second, the artist, in turn, as a being of 'exalted imagination', dragged by it, 'almost always beyond its goal'.²¹

Thus, a polar relationship or a diptych emerges: the judgement and sensitive ethos of the bourgeois 'friend of the arts' on the one hand, and the ethos and rapture of the artist on the other.

In order to fulfil oneself, such an artist depends on the mediating judgement of the other position. Thus, he understands himself as the result of the social division of labour and willingly accepts the distribution of specialisations and responsibilities through which it will fall to art to be instituted as a special

meaning inaugurated by Robespierre in official discourses was disseminated during the debates over the occupation of the Tuileries by the people on 20 June 1792. From year II onwards, the term came to fully mean counter-revolutionary, aristocratic, and even criminal. In year IV, it fell into disuse and was replaced by 'notable' – neither noble nor popular – used to designate the political power of the *honnêtes gens*, again in power after the coup of 9 Thermidor. See Dorigny 2005b, pp. 555–556. In the case of David, his return to the meanings of the early stages of the Revolution in his Thermidorian correspondence with D'Anglas and Mme. Huin, until the express use of the term in the last letter he sent Mme. Huin (see below), is a sign of his strategy.

- 21 '26 Brumaire year III of the French Republic. Luxembourg house of detentions/ *David to the citizen Boissy d'Anglas, representative of the people.*/No one except a true friend of the arts can appreciate in its fair value the heart and mind of an artist. He knows better than any other that his overexcited imagination leads him almost always beyond his goal. Even I knew that and believed I was safe, while the open abyss under my feet was about to swallow me./ The wicked, how they abused me! But do not think that I have ever been able to participate in their nefarious plots. No, no, my heart is pure, only my mind has failed me./ Painting will not be ashamed to count me among its children and my choice of subjects will prove to artists who come after me how sensitive my soul is'. ('Ce 26 brumaire an III de la République française. Maison d'arrêt du Luxembourg. David au citoyen Boissy d'Anglas, représentant du peuple./ Il n'y a qu'un homme vraiment ami des arts qui puisse apprécier à sa juste valeur le cœur et la tête d'un artiste. Il sait mieux qu'aucun autre que son imagination exaltée l'entraîne presque toujours au-delà du but. Je le savais moi-même, je croyais m'en être garanti, quand l'abîme ouvert sous mes pas était prêt de m'engloutir./ Les méchants, combien ils m'ont abusé! N'allez pas cependant croire que j'aie jamais pu participer à leurs infâmes complots. Non, non, mon cœur est pur, ma tête seule a failli./ La peinture ne rougira pas de me compter au nombre de ses enfants et le choix de mes sujets prouvera aux artistes qui viendront après moi combien j'ai l'âme sensible'). David 1988b, p. 142.

form of merchandise and supposedly autonomous aesthetic activity.²² This duo continue to perform in the contemporary *commedia dell'arte*.

Toward the Private Virtues

Thus, the combination of artist and civic legislator – that David had exercised alongside others, like the actor Collot d'Herbois, and craftsmen in general who had constituted either one base of Jacobinism or one force of the *sans-culotte* movement – was overcome.²³

In December 1794, forty-two days after his letter to d'Anglas, David was released. Five months later, he would be imprisoned again (28 May 1795), following the popular uprisings of April and May against the famine that had spread after the December liberation of the prices of foodstuffs, required by the victors of the Thermidor. In fact, the repressive wave of May reaches the women's committees, which were very active in the struggle against high prices, and the remaining members of the Mountain, like David. A revolutionary recurrence?²⁴ But how are we to measure David's convictions and his sincerity?

Conversely, it is relevant to note that during this process a new stylistic economy was in gestation; one in which the qualities and functions of images and pictorial ideas were undergoing radical change.

However, the painter, imprisoned in May, receives a provisional release in August and the right to await on probation the outcome of the trial. Under

22 See *ibid.*

23 David attributes the charges against him at that time to the corporate dispute with his peers – that is, to rivalries typical of competition, a language that a liberal and *honnête homme* can immediately understand. And, to assure the interlocutor of his conversion, he swears filial allegiance to painting, which he celebrates as a mission and to which he attributes a hypostatic nature. Once, in response to a missive from academic painters, who feared the closing of the Academy, severely criticised by David at the Convention tribune, he had responded by affirming that 'he was no longer a painter, but a deputy', who disdained the painter's craft 'like mud' ('*quant à moi, le métier, je le méprise comme de la boue*'). David, *apud* Michel 1988a, p. 71. This is a play on words, since mud (*boue*, in French) was the term which, in the jargon of painters, designated the mixture of colours on the palette. See also note 9, in 'The Hemicycle: The Image of the Nation-Form' in this volume.

24 It was said that David's name had been found on the list of subscribers to Gracchus Babeuf's newspaper, of the movement of the 'equals', which fought against private property and preached common work. Someone supposedly heard that this time David, as it was said, would hardly escape. See Michel 1988a, p. 96.

custody of magistrate Pierre Sériziat, his brother-in-law and a man of the post-Jacobin order, David retires to the country estate of his benefactor.

From there he writes Mme. Huin, claiming to be a new man, and it is there he will forge a new pictorial style, precisely that of his hosts' portraits, the Sériziat couple, today given pride of place in the Louvre. Magistrate Sériziat was his defender and David was a new painter. In his letter to Mme. Huin, written between one portrait and another, he explains not only himself, but also his new painting. He announces he has no more time and mind for the historical genre, but only energy to devote himself entirely to the painting which serves him as a 'consolation' and as an 'infallible remedy'.²⁵

Freedom, Ambiguity, and Autonomy

The strategy will prove successful, even masterful, for it exemplifies a new kind of art and artist. David's programme of artistic reform, made explicit with visceral rawness, is of extra-biographical and historical interest. In fact, it reveals that the new aesthetics of a hostage-painter of a bourgeois benefactor. Technically it reveals a provisional or conditional freedom, which lies in the construction and achievement of ambiguity.

Excellence in this art form, new examples of which David will create later, will reveal the hidden kernel or interior of what came to be proclaimed as 'aesthetic autonomy' in the society of division of labour and specialised knowledge.

In short, regarding the content of art, David's survival and his political amnesty mark the overcoming of the Diderotian-Rousseauist project that prevailed in the Revolution and of which David was an exemplar – the cult of simplicity and truth or return to nature²⁶ – in favour of pictorial ambiguity,

25 In his letter to Mme. Huin (23 September 1795), David exalts the issues of private conduct in terms adequate to an interlocutor whose condition as a mother is, moreover, invoked by the painter. Indeed, Mme. Huin was not only the mother of a former student of David, but also friends with his ex-wife, Marguerite-Charlotte Pécoul, from whom he had divorced when he became a deputy and a regicide – and whom David would marry again the following year (1796). Thus, Huin is a key piece in the chess game of David's subjective reconstruction. For his interlocutor, the painter, who once exalted the universality of nature and humanity, now multiplies exhortations to the private values of family and the individual aspects of the activities of teacher and painter. See David 1988c, pp. 143–144.

26 'Nature does nothing incorrect. Any form, beautiful or ugly, has its cause, and of all beings that exist, there is not a single one which is not as it should be' (*La nature ne fait rien*

or of the refunctioning of the image as a mask. This, in turn, will institute the function of the expert judge, as a kind of legal adviser in the arts, a master in his own way in concealing or masking with words.

Glaciation and Narcissism

The new pictorial style of the Sériziat portraits is, in the idea suggested by Régis Michel, a 'glacial realism'.²⁷ Both the recipient and the object of the new painting belong to the Thermidorian bourgeoisie. In the new historical scene, the painter of the nation founded in nature gives way to a master whose talents refine the representation of the social and psychological mask through which the Thermidorian bourgeois presents himself to others. The 'glacial realism' certainly includes division of social functions and sexual roles. Thus, Pierre Sériziat, the benefactor of the painter, lawyer, magistrate, and landowner appears as a knight, wearing his *culottes*, riding boots, and a whip; and, last but not least, also as a redeemer, seen from below, set against the sky (of ideas).²⁸ Similarly, David's sister-in-law Emile Pécoul Sériziat, depicted in the first portrait, combines white clothes, typical of the neoclassical style then in vogue, with ornaments marking her as a landowner: rural touches in the hat, ribbon, the bunch of flowers ... her young son, holding her hand, crowns the image of the family of *honnêtes gens*.

The Jacobin painter, once clearly lyrical and fervent, and striving for equivalence with the philosophy of the Revolution,²⁹ now offers a painting of cold and

d'incorrect. Toute forme belle ou laide a sa cause, et de tous les êtres qui existent, il n'y en a pas un qui ne soit comme il doit être'). Diderot 1996a, p. 467.

27 In his characterisation, the author compares the 'glacial realism' [*réalisme glacé*] of David, that he sees in *The Coronation of Napoleon and Josephine* (*Le Sacre de Napoléon*), to the 'funereal romanticism' [*romantisme funèbre*] of Antoine-Jean Gros, concerning the differences between David's painting and the last, *Napoleon on the Battlefield at Eylau*, February 9, 1807 (*Napoléon sur le Champ de Bataille d'Eylau, le 9 Février 1807*), both exhibited in the Salon of 1808. See Michel 1988a, p. 110.

28 In the Thermidorian period, rural properties were the object of burning dispute between the new bourgeoisie – which became rich with the Revolution and took possession of land (auctioned as 'goods of the nation' after being expropriated from the émigré nobility and the clergy) – and the old owners, who had a claim on the land by lineage. See Bertaud 1973, pp. 7–8, 10–21. On the appropriation of expropriated land, auctioned in large plots instead of being divided into small areas accessible to the peasants, see Soboul 2000, pp. 208–209.

29 See David 1988a, pp. 159–160.

exceptional precision – if indeed it expresses any feeling at all – will embody, for posterity, a demure and silent irony.

In short, these are paintings in the service of narcissism, as we say after Freud, or of the masks worn by his portrait subjects. The acts of the painter and the elements of painting are reordered. Traces of work and feeling are eliminated; nature seems to be tamed; the painting is now guided by the function of a mirror, or it aims to duplicate the mask. It reproduces what the portrait subjects want for themselves. The clean and succinct economy of the canvas (the final product) celebrates the masterful triumph of the artist over nature.

In terms of function, the painting-hostage is defined as service. Talent and accuracy turn the canvas into a polished and precise surface, hence, into a canvas-mirror. In a word, this is the meaning of the aesthetic promise or of the pictorial programme translated in the Sériziat portraits, and in others too.³⁰

An entire page of the aesthetic programme of the French *Lumières* is then turned. One may contrast the programme of the canvas-mirror or of the search, now intended by David, for precision and for a specific determination of every individual as unique, or as an opposite of nature, not only with the poetics of Diderot and Rousseau. But equally, one might see it as being opposed in their relation to the Winckelmannian definition of beauty – as a state above all particularity.³¹ Such had been the mode or programme that nurtured the idealism with which David had once represented the figures of the revolutionary martyrs, Lepeletier, Marat, and Bara,³² or even his rejuvenated self-portrait, in prison – despite the fact that they also carried many Diderotian novelties derived from direct observation ... We need not provide details here,

30 See, for example, *Portrait de Mme. Verninac*.

31 'Another feature of elevated beauty is its indeterminacy [*Unbezeichnung*]: that is, its forms cannot be described by other points or other lines except those that alone form beauty; there results a form that is not peculiar to one determinate person, and that expresses neither a distinct state of the soul nor the feeling of a passion, that would mingle with beauty traits that are foreign to it and would break its unity' ('*Une autre caractéristique de la beauté élevée, c'est son indétermination (Unbezeichnung): c'est-à-dire que ses formes ne peuvent pas être décrites par d'autres points et d'autres lignes que ceux qui forment seuls la beauté; il en résulte une forme qui n'est pas propre à une personne déterminée et qui n'exprime ni un certain état d'âme, ni le sentiment d'une passion, qui mêleraient à la beauté des traits qui lui sont étrangers et briseraient son unité*'). Winckelmann 1982, pp. 149–150, apud Pommier 1989, p. 78.

32 See David, *Marat Breathing his Last/ The Death of Marat and The Death of Bara*. For the painting of Le Peletier, see note 2 above.

except to note that they referred to nature or to universal forms and not to particular traits.

At any rate, far from the 'state of nature' of Rousseau, and close to the 'impartial observer' of Adam Smith, the Thermidorian painter acts by sharply observing the details of the situation or functional role of the portrait subjects, according to a new 'reality principle' – does the latter foreshadow the 'disenchantment of the world'? And he will not abandon such a key, engendered in and for a private exercise, not even when at the service of Bonapartism.

'Glacial realism' goes hand in hand with the conception of painting as a talent given not by nature, but 'by heaven'.³³ Similarly, painting becomes once again a craft from which to extract advantage in private terms and for the good of the family. It also functions as a form of therapy in the individual sphere.³⁴

In the end, the painter receives his final amnesty on 26 October 1795. Historical omen or synchronicity of similar rehabilitation processes? In fact, on the same day and, moreover with the award of a strategic command, the rehabilitation of another former Jacobin released from prison is celebrated: the young general Bonaparte, a hero of the Republic at Toulon (November 1793), a close friend of Augustin Robespierre – who was summarily executed together with his older brother, Maximilien, in the Thermidor. On 26 October 1795, about 15 months after the 9 Thermidor, Bonaparte becomes commander-in-chief of the army of the interior ...³⁵

33 'From now on I want nothing but to work on my salvation and, if heaven has given me some propensities, I want to take advantage of them, and also think a bit about the well-being of my children, without, however, forgetting glory' (*'Je ne veux plus désormais m'occuper que de mon salut et si le ciel m'a doué de quelques dispositions je veux en tirer parti, et penser un peu aussi à faire le bien de mes enfants sans cependant oublier la gloire'*). David 1988c, p. 144.

34 'May good be done, may the *honnêtes gens* be happy and I will have nothing more to desire' (*'Que le bien se fasse que les honnêtes gens soient heureux et je n'aurais rien à désirer'*), he affirms. David professes other analogous forms of hedonism. The 'joie de vivre' is reflected in the practice of gardening: being in nature, surrounded by it – that is, by the rural property – but without blending into nature – a recurring paradigm of the revolutionaries of previous times. Gardening, as well as devoting oneself to children and students pairs up with subjective dedication to art – whose universal and objective potential is no longer evoked. See *ibid.*, pp. 143–144.

35 The newly amnestied General Bonaparte 'presented arms' and his utility to the Thermidorian Directory when, on 13 Vendémiaire (6 October 1795), he used cannon fire in the very centre of Paris in front of the Church of Saint-Roch to suppress the monarchist attempt at a *putsch*. See Michel 1988a, p. 96.

Glory, Prosperity, and Caesarism

In mid-1797, victor over the Habsburgs and in Campo Formio (1797), the new conqueror of Italy visits David's studio and poses for the painter. The general's Thermidorian portrait, sketched by David, will evoke a Roman air.³⁶ Subsequently, the painter will act decisively in the construction of the Caesarean charisma of the one who, after the coup of 18–19 Brumaire (9–10 November 1799), will successively assume the positions of Prime-Consul and Emperor.³⁷

But let us leave aside the perspective of the State, of David's services to Bonapartism,³⁸ and focus instead on the specific private issue that, born in the Thermidorian period, would also follow the course of the Bonapartist cycle: the artist as a liberal entrepreneur and private producer of services.

Professional painting, which negotiates services and compensation, independently of the Academy (closed down by the Revolution) belongs in the core of the new bourgeois order and will endure the many breakdowns of the State order, in the history of France after the First Empire. Thus, David, as the official painter of the Bonapartist State's pictorial representation, did not cease work as a private professional. Numerous disputes, verifiable through his correspondences or his surroundings with those responsible for the finances of the Empire, make evident the change in conduct when compared with the painter of the Revolution, who declared he was assuming service for the nation exclusively in a political key.³⁹

Let us then focus on the private aspect of the matter. While he provides the first services to the general, still before the Brumaire, David also prepares *The*

36 See David, *Sketch of the Profile of General Bonaparte*; it has a note below it, by the hand of the author: 'the general of the great nation'. See also David, *Le Général Bonaparte*.

37 David was appointed in 1800, shortly after the Brumaire coup, 'Painter of the Government', a title he refused. In 1801, he painted a tribute to the general: *Bonaparte Crossing the Saint Bernard Pass*, which presents Bonaparte as a historical successor to the Carthaginian general 'Annibal' (247–183) and to the Emperor of the Franks 'Karolus Magnus' (ca. 747–814), according to the exergue in the foreground. After the manner of the picture, in 1804 the First Consul would adopt the model of sword and crown of the emperor of the Franks, for the ceremony of his own imperial coronation. Still in 1804, David would be appointed the 'First painter of the Emperor' and paint the large canvas *The Coronation of Napoleon and Josephine (Le Sacre de Napoléon)*. See Michel 1988a, pp. 103–104.

38 See 'Eighteenth Brumaire, the Fabrication of a Totem: Freud, David and Bonapartism' in this volume.

39 On the sometimes harsh negotiations between the painter and the administration of the Empire, see Bordes 2005b, pp. 34–35. See also Michel 1988a, p. 110.

Intervention of the Sabine Women (*Les Sabines*), a revival of pre-revolutionary neoclassical painting, of the 'historical genre'.

The painting refers to an episode from classical history, the Romans' abduction of Sabine women, to discuss an aspect of the present. Both the classical pretext and allusion to the present through mythological concealment belong to this genre's standards. Here, the first aspect is observed by references to iconography,⁴⁰ while the second is highlighted by means of the walls, painted in the background of the scene through a profile that is immediately recognisable as the Bastille. Thus, French history of the past decade and the time of one generation take central stage, since the infants, born after the fact that caused the dispute, appear in the foreground.

David gave centre-stage to the female figures, who separate the fighters and protect and display the children. The meaning sought by the scene is clear. Time has passed, history has borne fruits and the times are of concord, or, going straight to the point, of sealing the conciliation around the new order.

Now, the programme of the party of this new order is precisely the one led by the victor of Brumaire. What is its premise? The victors of 9 Thermidor, the new owners of so-called 'national assets' – land expropriated from the aristocracy and high clergy and acquired at auction by the rising bourgeoisie – intend to ratify them against the returning emigrants who, in turn, want their land back. Similarly, the women of Sabine origin, presented in the canvas, protect their children, born from the Romans, against the vengeful Sabines.

At issue, therefore, is the new status of lands and their legitimacy. Ratification and conciliation around the new prosperity constitute the core of this programme of the new owners who rose with the monetisation of assets, against the aristocratic right of the said 'legitimist' cause of the emigrants.

Thus, the political programme marked on this large canvas, when presented as if imbued with a certain naturalness – symbolised by small cupids, from David's masterful brush – heralds a national project, although without explicit reference to Bonaparte. Similarly, the conqueror of Italy will command the 'taking office' of 18 Brumaire as a natural act and will claim for himself the 'Roman' (read: 'natural' or 'historically legitimate') powers of consul.

40 According to the genre's practices, elements of the painting were extracted from the 'Episodes in Achilles's Life', the face of the vat of a sarcophagus of unknown origin, but belonging to the old Borghese collection, and mounted on the walls of the Villa of the same name, where David had studied when he received a scholarship for the Academy, in Rome. The set would become part of the Louvre collection in 1808. See Baratte and Metzger 1985, pp. 252–256.

Thus, if Rome is the pretext, the ratification of ownership of the country's best lands is the crucial issue. 'There is no turning back' is the message of the brush as well as of the consul's troops.⁴¹ The painting is therefore Bonapartist *avant la lettre*, or in full sync with the process. Moreover, one of the first acts of the First Consul after taking office was to visit the *Sabine Women* exhibition.⁴² Mutual recognition or a project hatched in collaboration?

The fact is that from this time, two successful negotiation strategies, at the forefront of corporate interest and hardened by several political crises, will appear in association.

Hoisted, after the Brumaire, into the circle of direct advisors of the First Consul, and also called to design the residence of Bonaparte in Malmaison, David elaborates, in December 1799, a project for the conservation, inspection, and surveillance policy 'of the national monuments, manufactures, and arts', for the 'direction of national art schools, establishments, and manufactures based on the arts of drawing, public buildings when undergoing ornamentation or new constructions'.⁴³

Let us dwell on the precursor and exemplary model of the *Sabine Women*. Its exhibition at the Louvre, in the great hall of the old Architecture Academy, was opened on 21 December 1799, only seven weeks after the First Consul and 'Lord Protector' of the Republic took office (at the age of 30).

Official painting of the Consulate or acclaimed autonomous artwork? Instituting an entry charge – which (although already in existence in the Netherlands and England) was unheard of on the larger scale of France – at the rate of 1.80 franc per person, enables David to raise 65,000 francs, which will enable him to buy a country estate. The painting remained on public display at the Louvre practically for the entire duration of the pre-imperial consular regime.⁴⁴

In short, the Brumaire regime opens the era of the *censitaires républiques*, in which the State and the market share arms and a common soul.

41 In the innovative pamphlet that accompanied the painting's exhibition, David affirmed: 'Nature and the course of our ideas have changed since the Revolution; and we will not go back, I hope, to the false delicacies that for such a long time compressed genius' (*La nature et le cours de nos idées ont changé depuis la révolution; et nous ne reviendrons pas, j'espère, aux fausses délicatesses qui ont si longtemps comprimé le génie*). The sentence, as well as the rest, sounded like music to the ears of the new owners of the 'national assets'. See David 1997, p. 15.

42 See Michel 1988a, p. 103.

43 See Bordes 2005b, p. 30 and note 22, p. 339.

44 The exhibition, on display for five years, attracted 36,000 visitors, twice the audience of the Salons of the time. See Michel 1988a, p. 99.

The New Wealth

The shocking paradox, the surprising combination of two apparently opposing terms, 'ancient' and 'modern' – or the lack of identity of a class, the one of the 'notables' or 'honnête gens'⁴⁵ – are the elements with which David – a skilful advertiser already recognised by the Jacobins⁴⁶ – forges the beginning of the pamphlet that would accompany the painting's exhibition.

In fact, the painter recognises its specific power and is not afraid of losing control over the effect by admitting it in the text. Rather, he institutes it as a fundamental science of the new wealth (coming from sales): 'It is a great secret to touch the human heart; and by this means a great impulse might be given to the public energy and to the national character'.⁴⁷

In short, the painter and the general define strictly parallel and synchronous strategies, in their respective plans of action. Their manoeuvres coincide possibly because both perceive the new rising power: commodities and the general law of charm, in force.⁴⁸ Thus, as the skilful observers they are (like Ulysses in front of Circe [*Odyssey*, *x*]) of the sortileges of form and the movements of things, both painter and general bring the 'subtle' science ... 'of the whims' of every man touched by the general transformation into commodity.⁴⁹

While preaching the *pax des notables* (the *pax* of the notables) and the legitimisation of the great post-revolutionary owners, David proposes in his pamphlet a new regime for the arts. It is articulated around the painter as a private entrepreneur and the market as judge. The act of acquiring (or not) offers a value judgement, says the painter.⁵⁰ From the auction comes truth – what could sound better for the new owners?

45 'Antiquity did not cease to be the great school of modern painters' (*L'Antiquité n'a pas cessé d'être la grande école des peintres modernes*). See David 1997, p. 7.

46 See Dowd 1948b, pp. 24–44.

47 ('*C'est un grand secret que de remuer le cœur humain; et ce moyen peut donner un grand mouvement à l'énergie publique et au caractère national*'). David 1997, p. 11.

48 'The wealth of the societies in which the capitalist mode of production prevails appears as an "immense collection of commodities"; the individual commodity appears as its elementary form' (Marx 1990c, p. 125). This is the sentence that opened the most influential essay of that year (1867).

49 'A commodity appears at first sight an extremely obvious, trivial thing. But its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties' (Marx 1990c, p. 163).

50 'Today, this practice is observed in England, where it is called *exhibition*. The paintings of the death of General Wolf and Lord Chatam, painted by West, our contemporary, earned

The liberal agenda for the arts could not be more explicit: the alliance of the painter with the power of arms. So, the First Consul, on the other hand, back from Marengo, orders the constitution of a specific commission to lead the arts according to the needs of the propaganda of the regime.⁵¹ The canvas that consummated the mutual desire, *Bonaparte Crossing the Saint-Bernard Pass*, would mark an epoch.⁵²

him huge sums in that country. The *exhibition* existed there long, and was introduced in the last century by Van Dyck, whose works the public came in crowds to admire; he achieved a considerable fortune by such means./ Is it not an idea as just and wise that which offers the arts the means to exist by themselves, to sustain themselves through their own means, and enjoying noble independence which befits the genius, and without which the fire which animates him would soon go out? On the other hand, is there a more honourable way to take advantage of the fruits of his work than submitting it to the judgment of the public, without expecting any other reward except the welcome they want to offer the artist? If the production is mediocre, the public's judgment will soon do justice. The author, by achieving neither glory nor compensation, will learn, through a severe experience, about the means to repair his mistakes, and to captivate the attention of the spectators through more appropriate conceptions'. (*De nos jours, cette pratique est observée en Angleterre, où elle est appelée exhibition. Les tableaux de la mort du général Wolf et du lord Chatam, peints par West, notre contemporain, lui ont valu dans ce pays des sommes immenses. L'exhibition y existait longtemps auparavant, et y avait été introduite, au siècle dernier, par Van Dyck, dont le public venait en foule admirer les ouvrages; il parvint par ce moyen à une fortune considérable. N'est-ce pas une idée aussi juste que sage que celle qui procure aux arts les moyens d'exister par eux-mêmes, de se soutenir par leurs propres ressources, et de jouir de la noble indépendance qui convient au génie, et sans laquelle le feu qui l'anime est bientôt éteint? D'un autre côté, quel moyen plus digne de tirer un parti honorable du fruit de son travail que de l'accueil qu'il veut bien lui faire? Si la production est médiocre, le jugement du public en aura bientôt fait justice. L'auteur, ne recueillant ni gloire ni indemnité, s'instruira, par une sévère expérience, des moyens de réparer ses fautes, et de captiver l'attention des spectateurs par de plus heureuses conceptions*'). David 1997, pp. 8–10.

51 The commission was composed by Lucien Bonaparte, brother of the general and Minister of the Interior; by General Berthier, present in Marengo; and by the director of the Louvre, Vivant Denon, in charge of providing the pictorial documentation of six specific battles: Rivoli (14 January 1797) and Marengo (14 June 1800), respectively, of the first and second campaigns in Italy; Messkirch (5 May 1800, of the German campaign); and Pyramids (21 July 1798), Aboukir (25 July 1799) and Mount Thabor (16 April 1799), of the campaign in Egypt. The list was indicated by Bonaparte himself in a letter on 27 Messidor, year VIII (16 July 1800), preceded by the order to the commission, according to the First Consul, to 'choose the best painters to paint the following battles'. See Bordes 2005b, pp. 31–32, note 28, pp. 339–340.

52 See Bordes 2005b, pp. 33–34, and 'Eighteenth Brumaire, the Fabrication of a Totem: Freud, David, and Bonapartism' in this volume.

The Author, the Client, and Antiphrasis

'Favouring the system of public exhibitions, the people, by (means of) a small contribution, will be able to share in the wealth of the genius',⁵³ affirms David in defence of the initiative of charging entrance fees for the exhibition of the *Sabine Women*.⁵⁴

53 David 1997, p. 12.

54 '[H]ow happy I would feel, if, by giving the example of a public exhibition, I could induce the practice! If this usage could offer to the talents a means to rid them of poverty, and if, as a result of this first benefit, I could contribute to return the arts to their true destiny, which is to nurture the morale and elevate the souls, transmitting to the spectators' souls the generous feelings evoked by the productions of artists! The act of touching the human heart is a great secret; and this means can give a great impulse to the public energy and to the national character. Who would deny that until now the French people have been oblivious to the arts, and that they have lived among artworks without taking part in them? If painting or sculpture offered a rare production, soon it would become the conquest of a rich man who often took possession of it for a mediocre price, and who, jealous of his exclusive property, did not allow but a small number of friends to see it: seeing it was denied to the rest of society. At least, favouring the system of public exhibitions, the people, for a small contribution, will be able to share the wealth of the genius: they will enlighten themselves about the arts, to which they are not as indifferent as it is believed; their lights will be brighter, their taste will be formed; and, even though they are not experienced enough to decide about the finesses or the difficulties of art, their judgement, always dictated by nature, and always produced by feelings, will often be able to please, and even enlighten an author who will be able to appreciate it'. ('[Q]ue je m'estimerais heureux, si, en donnant l'exemple d'une exposition publique, je pourrais en amener l'usage! si cet usage pouvait offrir aux talents un moyen de les soustraire à la pauvreté, et si, par suite de ce premier avantage, je pouvais contribuer à rendre les arts à leur véritable destination, qui est de servir la morale et d'élever les âmes, en faisant passer dans celles des spectateurs les sentiments généreux rappelés par les productions des artistes! C'est un grand secret que de remuer le cœur humain; et ce moyen peut donner un grand mouvement à l'énergie publique et au caractère national. Qui pourra nier que jusqu'à présent le peuple français n'ait été étranger aux arts, et qu'il vécut au milieu d'eux sans y participer? La peinture ou la sculpture offrait-elle une production rare, elle devenait aussitôt la conquête d'un riche qui s'en emparait souvent à un prix médiocre, et qui, jaloux de sa propriété exclusive, n'admettait à la voir qu'un petit nombre d'amis: sa vue en était interdite au reste de la société. Au moins, en favorisant le système des expositions publiques, le peuple, pour une légère rétribution, entrera en partage des richesses du génie: il s'éclairera sur les arts, auxquelles il n'est pas si indifférent qu'on affecte de le croire; ses lumières s'accroîtront, son goût se formera; et, quoiqu'il ne soit pas assez exercé pour décider sur les finesses ou les difficultés de l'art, son jugement, toujours dicté par la nature, et toujours produit par le sentiment, pourra souvent flatter, et même éclairer un auteur qui saura l'apprécier'). David 1997, pp. 11–13.

Just as he switches from the praise of nature to the eulogy of the market, David also preserves the usage of the French *Lumières* and the political practice of presenting his operations in a programmatic and universal manner. He recycles eloquence and reasoning according to the new supremacy:

For my part, I do not know higher honour than that of having the public as judge. I do not fear from them either passion or partiality: *their retributions are voluntary donations which prove their taste for the arts*; their praise is the free expression of the pleasure they experience; and such rewards are well worth, undoubtedly, those from academic times.⁵⁵

Despite the new discourse, the painter remains somewhat reticent towards the new order, and this will reappear (if not in direct comments, then in

55 (Emphasis added) (*Pour moi, je ne connais point d'honneur au-dessus de celui d'avoir le public pour juge. Je ne crains de sa part ni passion ni partialité: ses rétribution sont des dons volontaires qui prouvent son goût pour les arts; ses éloges sont l'expression libre du plaisir qu'il éprouve; et de telles récompenses valent bien, sans doute, celles des temps académiques*). David 1997, p. 15. However, David is not aiming at the wide interest of the public alone, but also of his professional category and of the government. Thus, he concludes: 'The reflections I proposed, and the system of public exhibition, of which I was the first to give an example, were suggested to me mainly by the desire to offer the artists who profess painting to have the means to be compensated for the use of their time and for the sacrifice of their forces, and of ensuring them a remedy against poverty, which is very frequently their unfortunate fate. I was encouraged and aided in this vision by the government, which, on this occasion, offered a great proof of the impressive protection it grants to the arts, providing a place for my exhibition, with other considerable benefits: however, I shall have received a very satisfying reward if when the public comes to enjoy my painting, I am able to open to artists a useful way, which, exciting their encouragement, contributes to the advancement of art, and perfection of morality, which we should constantly strive for'. (*Les réflexions que j'ai proposées, et le système d'exposition publique, dont j'aurai le premier donné l'exemple, m'ont été suggérés principalement par le désir de procurer aux artistes qui professent la peinture le moyen d'être indemnisés de l'emploi de leur temps et du sacrifice de leurs dépenses, et de leur assurer une ressource contre la pauvreté, qui n'est que trop souvent leur triste partage. J'ai été encouragé et aidé dans ces vues par le gouvernement, qui, dans cette occasion, m'a donné une grande preuve de la protection éclatante qu'il accorde aux arts, en me fournissant un local pour mon exposition, avec d'autres accessoires considérables: mais j'aurai reçu une récompense bien flatteuse, si, le public venant à goûter mon tableau, je puis ouvrir aux artistes une route utile, qui, en excitant leur encouragement, contribue à l'avancement de l'art, et à la perfection de la morale, que nous devons sans cesse avoir pour objet*'). David 1997, pp. 16–17.

reports by third parties)⁵⁶ and transversally in his painting, as will be seen below.

David's oblique point of view concerning aspects of the new order is of interest insofar as, applied to the field of painting, it signals new contradictions and, in an analogous manner, raises a new dialectic between painter and model, painting and client, etc. It entails a new political economy of authorship, in which the work of contradiction and correlated elaboration of shifting signs acquire the characteristics of conscious forms, as much as of deceit. In short, in the society atomised and divided according to conflicts of interest and ubiquitous individual struggles, defensive practices of enunciation and negotiation become widespread and structural; that is, they become a precondition for any deliberation or action, including those involving poetic content.

Thus, in the first year of the Consulate and at the pinnacle of his prestige and power in the heart of the government, David begins the portrait of Juliette Récamier, wife of the banker Jacques Récamier, financial backer of the Brumaire coup.

However, in September, the painter suspends the work, resisting his client's calls to modify the painting. According to legend, the painter replied to Récamier: 'Madam, ladies have their whims; artists too ... I will keep your portrait in the state it now is'.⁵⁷ The fact is that the work was preserved by the painter as it was; it was never retouched and, as it is said, was exhibited in his studio among the canvases he prized and regarded as completed.

In addition to the rumours and the curiosity surrounding the episode, in which the painter's initiative does not let itself be subsumed to the logic of the client, there is something new here that warrants scrutiny: David translates the conflict with his client into a certain mode of painting, that is, into a certain pictorial praxis.

In these terms is outlined an unprecedented contentious field that, which from then on, would widely develop following the general course of 'modern art'. This is a political economy of art that opposes, as in the context of the buying and selling of living labour, on the one hand, the spontaneity and freedom metabolised over the course of pictorial work, and, on the other, a

56 'I have always thought we were not virtuous enough to be republicans'. And also, 'victory pleases the gods', he says, citing Plutarch, 'on the other hand, defeat pleases Caton' (*'J'avais toujours bien pensé que nous n'étions pas assez vertueux pour être républicains' ... 'La victoire plaît aux Dieux, dit-il (David) citant Plutarque, mais la défaite à Caton'*). David, apud Michel 1988a, p. 102.

57 (*'Madame, les dames ont leurs caprices; les artistes en ont aussi. Permettez que je satisfasse le mien: je garderai votre portrait dans l'état où il se trouve'*). David, apud Michel 1988a, p. 112.

confiscation or advantage in the form of an image of himself that the holder of capital and buyer of the work intends to extract from the private appropriation of the painting.

In other words, David's reluctance to submit and alienate his work before the whims of a financier and imperious client comes to be translated into an apparent duality of pictorial procedures. That is, a dichotomous and enigmatic aesthetic state divides the painting into two different gestural and visual economies, making it appear unfinished to most people. Is this a milestone of authorial initiative (which resists alienating one's own work) in partially adverse times? A suspended work, a failed project, of ambiguous intentionality?

One can note that the canvas clashes with the style of the painter's post-Thermidorian 'glacial realism', for it includes two aspects: one that is well-defined and glacial – as in the post-Thermidorian portraits mentioned earlier – and another that is of a different character, seemingly unfinished, with instantaneity of brushwork.

Is this a revival? A resurgence of past rhythms? Did David's participation in the overthrow of the state, and his seeing the government up close, awaken him to new possibilities? How might we explain his intransigence, his insistence in resisting a client's judgement and reducing it to a whim against which he opposed his own purpose as an artist, so as to maintain the painting in its current form?

In fact, while the explicit brushstrokes and the chromatic field work in the surroundings stand out – as if they were breathing or pulsating – at the same time, the figure portrayed, as well as her clothes and furniture which symbolise her taste and define her way of being, are examined coldly. She is viewed ironically and through a magnifying glass as a specimen of a social species.

Thus, the painting depicts the figure from a distance, while inverting the supposed priority and making the space around her proximate, constituting it with aggressive brushstrokes. How to combine such inverse and contradictory perspectives that make the ground of the observation oscillate?

What explains the duality or heterogeneity of the perspectives? The model was, in Régis Michel's words, the 'undisputed queen of a society of newly rich [*parvenus*], the very symbol of upward mobility'.⁵⁸ This applies perhaps to the coolness or distance between the painter and his alleged theme, the figure portrayed. But what about the other aspect of the painting, that is, its aspects and elements of proximity?

58 Michel 1988a, p. 114.

A Spell and Its Negative

The *Récamier* portrait is undoubtedly exceptional in David's Thermidorian portraits, of which the Sériziat portraits and the *Portrait of Madame de Verninac* are characteristic. As such, in order to investigate the suspension of 'glacial realism' it will be useful to return to another of David's influences: namely, Rousseau.

The final paragraph of 'Book IV' of the philosopher's *Confessions* (1782/1789) clarifies the meaning he attributes to his narrative strategy. It may also help elucidate the question by indicating a possible appeal for the painter, that is, a reason to oppose his client and preserve the ostensibly incoherent state of the canvas. In that passage, Rousseau explains why he presents the disparity of moments and feelings of the narrator:

[B]ut in recounting with simplicity [to the reader] all that has happened to me, all my actions, thoughts, and feelings, I cannot lead him into an error, unless I do it wilfully, which by this means I could not easily effect, since it is his province to compare the elements, and judge of the being they compose: thus the result must be his work, and if he is then deceived, the error will be his own. It is not sufficient for this purpose that my accounts should be merely faithful, they must also be minute; it is not for me to judge of the importance of facts, I ought to declare them as they are, and leave the estimate that is to be formed of them to him.⁵⁹

Authenticity and equality in the dialogue with the reader – attributing to him equal conditions in the process of thinking – are Rousseau's rationale. Could we thus consider that, for a painter to proceed in a mode equivalent to Rousseau's, the act of dissipating himself by means of narrative fragments and scrutinising sensations through brushstrokes one by one would be the equivalent of submitting the painting to the truth of nature? Would this unaffected art experienced in the feeling of every moment mean simply offering nature's truth for someone

59 ('Mais en lui détaillant [au lecteur] avec simplicité tout ce qui m'est arrivé, tout ce que j'ai fait, tout ce que j'ai pensé, tout ce que j'ai senti, je ne puis l'induire en erreur, à moins que je ne le veuille; encore même en le voulant, n'y parviendrai-je pas aisément de cette façon. C'est à lui d'assembler ces éléments et de déterminer l'être qu'ils composent: le résultat doit être son ouvrage; et s'il se trompe alors, toute l'erreur sera de son fait. Or, il ne suffit pas pour cette fin que mes récits soient fidèles, il faut aussi qu'ils soient exacts. Ce n'est pas à moi de juger de l'importance des faits, je les dois tous dire, et lui laisser le soin de choisir'). Rousseau 1993, pp. 215–216.

else to see, explaining in detail *from what and how every act*, of seeing and painting, *is performed*?

Is this, therefore, in an analogous way, a 'confession' in painting? But designed to confess what? And why in such circumstances? Inversely, one could also speculate: what if on such terms the painter intended to establish tension or a polarity between a true pictorial praxis, of painting on the one hand, and the mundane art of dissimulation and exhibitionism on the other, that is, of the false art of capturing the attention and perception of the others, without revealing anything of oneself?

In short, if this hypothesis were valid, there would be two practices that would enter into conflict. One of truth or of revealing nature in painting, according to Rousseau, and another, typical of the order of the 'notables', of showing off without revealing oneself, in a dissimulated way – which was increasingly usual in the Thermidorian and business-minded order governed by economic imperatives.

However the scene is contradictory; it is *deliberately* enigmatic, one assumes, the product of a painter who mastered his means ... But why, or to what end?

This question was answered by René Magritte, who, besides being a painter, was a professional advertiser in his everyday life. Thus he was an expert in exhibitionism and dissimulation.⁶⁰ Magritte remade David's painting, replacing Récamier's image with a coffin: *Perspective: Madame Récamier by David*.

What did he want to evoke with this funereal reference? Through a symbol or image of death instead of the female figure, the *Portrait of Madame Récamier* is deciphered, Magritte suggests, through the clash between the glacial image of a mundane lady as a figure petrified or much less expressive than her surroundings, and, in turn, the pictorial surroundings that are much livelier in contrast with her.

Thus, it evokes for the viewer a dialectic, which presents in synthesis the truth of nature, converted into painting, facing its negation, as concretely appearing under those circumstances. In other words, this portrait offers a negation in the form of the deadly, secret, and devious spell of money, the merchandise of all merchandise – in this case embodied in the image of the wife of a Caesar of finance.

In the duality of its contradictory or incoherent appearance, divided between opposing pictorial modes, such a regime of meaning presents itself as polarised and enigmatic. In effect, its meaning is not outlined except in the dialectic beyond opposing appearances, through a vision mediated by the

60 See Craven 2007b, pp. 219–244.

contrast that includes the opposite term. Thus, one can only discern the truth of the painting through the falsity of the Récamier character; and, in turn, one can only distinguish the falsity of the latter through the truthfulness of the painting (the aggressive brushstrokes or the details of the unfinished process of its realisation).

Are we then approaching a Rousseauian answer, albeit one that is mediated by its negation and that cannot be put into other terms? A view about the situation of art in the order of anti-nature or of the supremacy of the market? Would the key to the freedom of the painting separated from nature reside in the ambiguous dialectic of antiphrasis? Did the painter find a margin from which to obliquely or ironically say what he was thinking about the new post-revolutionary order?

Mask and Despotism

With the establishment of the aesthetic order of the transition from the 9 Thermidor to the 18 Brumaire, which also extends to the Bonapartist cycle, there arises an order drawn from the mask or from anti-nature. That is an order that, in regard to the expression of freedom and nature, could only admit them in necessarily indirect and oblique terms. In the light of this opposition, one can distinguish the specific and constitutive character of the culture of despotism and mask, that is, a structurally ambiguous and contradictory aesthetic order. By contrast, the culture of the brief and intense revolutionary republican period was grounded in *natural, direct and transparent expression*.

Returning to our initial problem, this was precisely the time when David painted 'taking advice only from nature'. As I claimed at the outset, these paintings are now 'exiled' and misunderstood.

Let us return, then, to David's words before the National Convention, when he was in charge of organising the festival in honour of the young heroes Bara and Agricol Viala (1780–1793):

Men are just what the government makes of them: this is the truth of all times. Despotism reduces & corrupts public opinion, or, rather, where it reigns, it cannot exist; despotism carefully proscribes all virtues, &, to ensure its empire, it makes itself be preceded by terror, is surrounded by fanaticism & covers itself with ignorance. Everywhere the betrayal of the cloudy & perfidious eye, death & devastation follow it; it drags also behind the debasement with which it covers the regions in which it establishes its abode surrounded by darkness: it is in the shadows that

it meditates about crime & seizes its unfortunate victims, whose blood it sucks. Ingenious in tormenting them, it erects prisons; in its leisure time it invents tortures & pleases its eyes with the sight of corpses sacrificed in its fury. Did not Capet, the last of our tyrants, hypocritically want to enjoy this royal pleasure on 10 August?

Under the barbaric laws of despotism, degraded & immoral men do not retain even the lofty form given them by nature. Everywhere they carry corruption & discouragement: the arms are torn off from the plough & remain idle in the palaces of the great; portions of land are uncultivated, the flocks die on the dry pastures, & commerce is annihilated. It does more: its yoke is so heavy that it suffocates in the hearts even the desire to be a father, & that the wife curses its fertility; love for the country is banished, its voice is no longer heard, & cold selfishness replaces among men the virtues which abandon them: then their unhappiness is consummated: they become cowards, fierce & treacherous like their government. O humiliating truth! such was the Frenchman of old.

Let us turn, representatives of the people, our gaze away from this abyss ... & let us shed a light on the benefits of the republican government.

Democracy takes no advice except from nature, to which it constantly brings men. Its study makes them good, makes them love justice & fairness. Democracy is what inspires in them this noble disinterestedness which elevates their souls & renders them capable of undertaking & realising the greatest things. Under its reign, all thoughts, all actions refer to the country: the one who dies for it acquires immortality; the sciences and the arts are encouraged; they contribute to education & public happiness; they ornate virtue with the charms that make it dear to the mortals & inspire horror of crime: the land, fertile & generous, spreads onto its radiant face the treasures contained in it; it fills the farmer's wishes and barns with rich harvests. Under a sky so pure, under a government so beautiful, the mother then, the mother gives birth without pain & without regrets; she blesses her fertility, & makes the true wealth consist in the number of her children. Commerce flourishes in the shade of good faith, sacred equality hovers above the earth, & makes with the immense population a family. O consoling truth! this is the Frenchman of today.

Peoples, listen: & you, tyrants, read and pale.⁶¹

61 Emphasis added. (*Les hommes ne sont que ce que le gouvernement les fait: cette vérité fut de tous les temps. Le despotisme atténue & corrompt l'opinion publique, ou, pour mieux dire, là où il règne, il n'en peut exister; il proscriit avec soin toutes les vertus, &, pour assurer son*

State of Voluptuousness

What do the 'voluptuous forms' tell us today? The *Portrait of Mme. Pastoret* is not dated. The museum attributes the painting to a period before the republic. However, this is not consistent with the characterisation of a lady from the upper class, or *noblesse de robe*, dressed with a simplicity that is incompatible with the hegemony of pre-92 *bourgeoisie censitaire*. One need only look at the luxurious garments of David's self-portrait of 1790 (*Autoportrait*). Moreover, Pastoret watches over her son like a common mother. The most probable

empire, il se fait précéder de la terreur, s'enveloppe du fanatisme & se coiffe de l'ignorance. Par-tout la trahison à l'œil louche & perfide, la mort & la dévastation le suivent; il traîne aussi après lui l'avilissement dont il couvre les régions dans lesquelles il établit sa demeure environnée de ténèbres: c'est dans l'ombre qu'il médite le crime & rive les fers de ses malheureuses victimes, dont il suce le sang. Ingénieux à les tourmenter, il élève des bastilles; dans ses moments de loisir, il invente des supplices & repaît ses yeux de la vue des cadavres immolés à ses fureurs. Capet, le dernier de nos tyrans, ne voulut-il pas, le 10 août, hypocritement savourer ce royal plaisir?/ Sous les lois barbares du despotisme, les hommes avilis & sans morale, ne conservent pas même la forme altière que leur a donnée la nature. Partout ils portent la corruption & le découragement: les bras sont arrachés de la charrue & restent oisifs dans les palais des grands; les terres sont incultes, les troupeaux meurent dans les pâturages desséchés, & le commerce est anéanti. Il fait plus: son joug est si pesant qu'il étouffe dans les cœurs jusqu'au désir d'être père, & que l'épouse maudit sa fécondité; l'amour de la patrie est banni, sa voix ne se fait plus entendre, & le froid égoïsme remplace parmi les hommes les vertus qui les abandonnent: alors leur malheur est consommé: ils deviennent lâches, féroces & perfides comme leur gouvernement. O vérité humiliante! tel étoit le Français d'autrefois./ Détournons, représentans du peuple, nos regards de cet abyme ... & mettons au grand jour les avantages du gouvernement républicain./ La démocratie ne prend conseil que de la nature, à laquelle sans cesse elle ramène les hommes. Son étude est de les rendre bons, de leur faire aimer la justice & l'équité. C'est elle qui leur inspire ce noble désintéressement qui élève leurs âmes & les rend capables d'entreprendre & d'exécuter les plus grandes choses. Sous son règne, toutes les pensées, toutes les actions se reportent à la patrie: mourir pour elle, c'est acquérir l'immortalité; les sciences et les arts sont encouragés; ils concourent à l'éducation & au bonheur public; ils parent la vertu des charmes qui la rendent chère aux mortels & inspirent l'horreur du crime: la terre, féconde & généreuse, répand sur son front radieux les trésors que renferme son sein; elle comble les vœux du laboureur et remplit ses greniers de riches moissons. Sous un ciel aussi pur, sous un gouvernement aussi beau, la mère alors, la mère enfante sans douleurs & sans regrets; elle bénit sa fécondité, & fait consister la véritable richesse dans le nombre de ses enfans. Le commerce fleurit à l'ombre de la bonne foi, la sainte égalité plane sur la terre, & d'une immense population fait une nombreuse famille. O vérité consolante! Tel est le Français d'aujourd'hui./ Peuples, écoutez: & vous, tyrans, lisez & pâlissez'). David 1989, pp. 158–

hypothesis, therefore, is that David presents in these terms a mother (albeit a bourgeois one) from the 'cultural revolution' of year II.⁶²

The figure is presented in the act of sewing, even though she has no needle or thread to hand. It is a 'delicious' effect by the painter. The *voluptuous* gaze of the observer *naturally* completes the image; in order to outline the action, the painter need not depict the scene in detail according to the tradition of genre painting.

Thus, only after a careful look and second assessment can one conclude that the needle and thread were absent. Is the image only alive insofar as it is incomplete? Do finishing and finishing-it-off mean exactly the same thing?

At any rate, not just the image, but also the painting remains unfinished, pervaded by tension and antithetical procedures. In the chromatic field around the figure, the brushstrokes stand out much more than colours and tones, which tend towards unity and uniformity.

These elements reveal the freedom – evident in the vivacity of every brushstroke – and, at the same time, tend towards chromatic unity or interaction. Both poles can be seen: the brushstrokes and the natural and indivisible web of pictorial relations – also allegorised in the mother-child unity, which needs no emphasis. What do they mean?

It is likely that the painting is not alone the sole object of such reflexive acts. There is also the idea of the nation, a whole 'one and indivisible', a unity greater than its parts, and at the same time ideally alive in each of its citizens. Thus, the tender and caring mother figure alludes to the power that protects and maintains the nation, ensuring popular subsistence – a demand led by the women's movement.⁶³

62 'The first property is existence: one has to eat at any price', then affirmed Hébert, apud Bianchi 1982, p. 124.

63 The first demands for taxation on sugar and soap, of 48 popular sections, date from 25–27 February 1793 (year I). They faced tough crises of supply, scarcity and high costs. On 24 April 1793, Robespierre presented a project of subordination of property to social utility. Under pressure from the popular movement, the government set fixed prices (the so-called *maximum*) against the free trade in essentials – the first *maximum* in relation to grains and flour dates from 4 May. On 20 May the Convention established a compulsory loan on fortunes. (See Soboul 2000, pp. 291–293). On 26 July 1793, a law established the death penalty against speculators, imposed on producers and traders the declaration of their stocks and instituted commissions of control against withholders. (See Soboul 2000, p. 362). Popular demands, often led by women, for economic control and for aid continued. On 13 *Pluviôse* (1 February 1794) the Convention voted on ten million credits for the needy. On 3 *Ventôse* (21 February 1794), the deputy Barère proposed a new general *maximum*. 'On 8 *Ventôse* (26 February 1794), ... Saint-Just proposed a decree to sequester the

If this claim is accurate, then the portrait of Mme. Pastoret would also include an image of the government of The Mountain, an ally of the popular movement during the economic nationalisation process of year II. The canvas, in this case, would have been painted before the spring of 1794, when the Committee of Public Safety suspended the economic dirigisme, and the Jacobin government completed its divorce from the popular movement. Perhaps the painting was made even earlier than October 1793, when the government of the Mountain broke with the women's organisations and began to repress the *sans-culottes*.

In any case, the sense of protection and optimism of the image of a woman who weaves and safeguards her sleeping – perhaps converging with the ideal of a social Republic – opposes the meaning of The Fates. In the pictorial tradition, images of female figures who weave evoke unfavorable destinies. See Goya's *Las Parcas*.

property of suspects; on (day) 13 (3 March 1794), a second decree put the Committee of Public Safety in charge of presenting a report 'about the means to indemnify all the unfortunate with property from the enemies of the republic' / 'The force of things'; Saint-Just had declared, 'will perhaps lead us to results we had not previously imagined. Opulence is in the hands of a very high number of enemies of the Revolution, the needs place the people who work in the dependence of their enemies ... / The unlucky are the powers of the earth, they have the right to speak like lords to the governments that neglect them' (*'sur les moyens d'indemniser tous les malheureux avec les biens des ennemis de la République'* / *'La force des choses'*; avait déclaré Saint-Just, 'nous conduit peut-être à des résultats auxquels nous n'avons point pensé. L'opulence est entre les mains d'un assez grand nombre d'ennemis de la Révolution, les besoins mettent le peuple qui travaille dans la dépendance de ses ennemis ... / Les malheureux sont les puissances de la terre, ils ont le droit de parler en maîtres aux gouvernements qui les négligent'). Soboul 2000, p. 349. However, the contradictions of the Jacobin-popular alliance also have their own strength. Thus, the inversion of the tendency favourable to economic control, among the Jacobins who dominated the Committee of Public Safety, will crystallise after various crises that led to the elimination of the *enragés*, Hebertists, and others. The triumph of the *laissez-faire*, desired by the propertied classes, will culminate in divorce from the popular organisations on 22 July 1794, when the Mountain government fixed a *maximum* – but this time for salaries (!). The Parisian administration authoritatively reduced the daily salaries on 5 Thermidor (23 July 1794). Thus, the ties between the Mountain government and the popular classes were severed. Four days later, on 9 Thermidor, the anti-Jacobean coup was staged at the Convention. So Robespierre would wait in vain at the Hôtel de Ville, since the people would not take to the streets to defend the government. On the rise of popular power and the measures of economic control, see Bianchi 1982, pp. 121–135, 153–154, 238–241; on the end of the alliance between the Mountain government and the *sans-culottes* and the relaxation of control over illegal trade and prices, see Bianchi 1982, pp. 243–259; see also Soboul 2000, pp. 364–365.

Happiness, a New Idea ...

Indeed, French painting did not know of any similar arrangement of colours, whether in terms of intensity or in the insolence of its dimension, beyond all linear limitation. And it would be a long time before it saw anything like it again. It could be said the Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Matisse seem to spring directly from David's *Portrait of Madame Chalgrin*.

Brushstrokes and chromatic distinctions around the black colour – the colour against which all other colours seem to obtain light – clearly emphasise red, white, blue, and earthy tones. The solid construction of the shapes on the canvas, through colour, overcomes the rational order of the drawing and denotes, as if by means of its own voice and in a personal tone, the joy of the painter craftsman, the pleasurable experience of the means and circumstances of execution. In short, the vividness and pleasure of the sensations involved in the facture reveal a female figure with an explicit and frank expression. It is as if she were suggesting, through her straight gaze at the painting's observer, a promise of imminent realisation.

What experience could be evoked in such celebration, other than the formative power of the craftsman? Does not the female figure, which emerged from a palette of basically three colours (where black and blue work shoulder to shoulder, as do white and the earth tones), in the immediate and pure organisation of colour, with the sincerity of a natural or childish expression, evoke the national ensign for every citizen – and thus the love of the motherland? Could it be an image of the republic as a desirable and frank form or an image of the revolutionary voluptuousness of the artisan-citizen?⁶⁴

Thus, in such close terms this is not an image of motherland as the horizon or distant good – for example, as represented in Delacroix's *La Liberté Guidant le Peuple*,⁶⁵ concerned with the so-called Glorious Days of the Revolution of

64 I would like to thank the student Juliana Faleiros (ECA-USP), and highlight her sharp insight in distinguishing the underlying power of the tricoloured chromatic structure of the painting, clearly rejecting half-tones in favour of the explicit use of raw colours. The precision and pertinence of her visual finding are verified, in my view, not only on the plane of perception, but by her cross analysis of the picture and elements of the 'v' part of Rousseau's *Émile* (1762), in which the philosopher establishes links between political right and aspects of the affective economy of the genders. Moreover, without being limited to the elements provided by Rousseau's text, or rather despite them, the remarks in question simultaneously and dialectically considered the role of female activism in the radicalisation of the revolutionary process.

65 See Oehler 2004b, pp. 195–216.

1830. In turn, the proximity of the image and the intensity of colours in David's painting suggest the republic as nature, seen as a promise of happiness, daily peace, and intense sociability.

Hypothetically, could any historical experience correspond to such forms? In effect, the republican constitution of year II recognised peace as an authentic human aspiration and established it as a universal goal. In the age of the peoples that seemed to be emerging, the constitution recognised 'the universal tendency towards goodness', and Saint-Just conceived the idea of happiness as a general right and 'a new idea in Europe'.⁶⁶

In the eyes of the observer, do the exuberance and vividness of colours – including black, the emblematic colour of the clothes of Third Estate members – and the majority power of the red field suggest intensity and the realisation of different desires? Could the republican form – or the nation of the 'Social Contract' and 'General Will', imagined by Rousseau – be the natural channel for such desires?

One way or another, the observer is left with the experience of sensations stirred; thus, the intensity of colour proves the concrete affirmation of a sensitive state of transparency and happiness.

The Origin, Function, and Structure of a Nude

At first glance, in *The Death of Bara*, one may notice David's decision to give the facture of brushstrokes a structuring role or a priority and lasting meaning to their own momentum.

Moreover, an intrinsic dependence of the fabric of brushstrokes in the ambient light is made evident. When the observer walks in front of the painting, it changes, adjusting itself as an organic whole, as if it were breathing, opening and closing like the leaves of a forest.

Thus, the painting is *pervaded* by and *vulnerable* to the physical or ambient fleeting light, or *structured* by it in its many variations. Therefore, it immediately suggests a dialectic between the contingent and the enduring.

What allows the observer to differentiate the volume of Bara's body from the space surrounding him? Nothing, except the light reflected by parts of the canvas, since it does not present any other effective spatial index. Similarly, the twist of the body, which makes it seem so close, almost palpable, emphasises the painting's roots in the ambit of facture. The narrowing or flattening of

66 See Bianchi 1982, p. 157; see Soboul 2000, p. 349.

the depth box is another structural mark of the work, as with the earlier *Marat Breathing his Last/ The Death of Marat* and the aforementioned female portraits. At the same time, the paint highlights its own materiality. In fact, when looking at the painting, perception and reflexion are connected. In short, it is a unique representation among the many depictions of Bara, the boy hero, according to the eulogistic clichés of the time.

Under what circumstances was the painting made and to what end? Robespierre brought the case of Bara to the tribune of the Convention.⁶⁷ He proposed the *pantheonisation* of the 14-year-old as a national hero and the creation of a painting in his honour (to be made by David).

The Jacobin leader depicted Bara without any special features, thus preparing him as an object of general empathy. Aware of the propaganda strategy, David followed it closely. He elaborated his painting through the suppression of all anecdotal detail.

The Death of Bara was destined to perform a votive function on a large scale: it was painted for a public procession linked to the act of *pantheonisation* for which two of David's students were supposed to make two huge banners based on the painting.⁶⁸

Winckelmann's emphasis on an ideal beauty that is distant from all particularity probably occurred to David. Thus, it may have contributed to his decision to present the young Bara nude, unlike many of the prints of that time. However, the classic reference here, instead of defining an aesthetic model, serves the purpose of propaganda, addressed to the pathos of the spectator. Once a predicate restricted to the visual representation of the divine, the nude now serves to value a *plebeian* or popular hero.⁶⁹

Democracy and Nature

The young Bara is nude, but his gender is clearly indeterminate. The naked body's shapes are those of a hermaphrodite or androgynous being. How might we explain them? According to Régis Michel:

67 See Michel 1989, p. 60. See Robespierre 1989, pp. 142–143.

68 David presented the project for the act to the Convention, but the Thermidorian coup erupted and the festival was cancelled. On the project, see David 1989, pp. 158–161 and note 61 above. On the correspondence from two of David's students, Gérard and Serangeli, after the cancellation of the festival, see Michel 1989, pp. 60–65.

69 See Michel 1989, pp. 60–68.

The asexual grace of Bara only adds to his abstract nudity. There is an influence of Rousseau in this radical quest for primitive purity. Bara nude is humanity's return to childhood, before its social corruption. It is the promise of a world free of despotism, where nature is finally reconciled with itself, that is, with democracy, in David's words. It is the *virtue* of the new man.⁷⁰

Again, the question emerges about the unfinished or open-ended process and, again, it should be noted that David officially declared to the Convention that the painting was finished. Later, he preserved it in his studio next to two emblematic pieces of his earlier work: *The Oath of the Horatii* and *The Lictors Returning to Brutus the Bodies of His Sons*.⁷¹ Why then question the idea that the painting of Bara was resolved?

Handmade

How can the voluptuousness of the process – open-ended and predominating over form – be combined with the operative judgement aiming at the functionality of the canvas? The simplicity and the state of the facture could entail a strategy for denying both the painting of historical genre, of finished shapes and images, and the picture of sentimental scenes, for example, by Greuze.⁷²

In effect, the operation of Jacobin propaganda, through the use of nudity, could undesirably move closer to classic coldness. The character of David's brushstrokes demonstrate that he did not intend this coldness. The brushwork is, as Régis Michel argues,

[t]he true subject of the painting. The effect of its insisting vibration conveys a double metaphor. The first is direct: the idea of *combat*. The mark of the brush restores its animation – almost its smoke, one could say. It evokes by itself a disorder of the battle without falling back to the inferior genre of military painting. The second metaphor is more

70 ('La grâce asexuée de Bara ne fait qu'ajouter à sa nudité abstraite. Il y a du Rousseau dans cette quête radicale de la pureté primitive. Bara nu, c'est le retour à l'enfance de l'humanité, avant la corruption sociale. C'est la promesse d'un monde affranchi du despotisme, où la nature est enfin réconciliée avec elle-même, c'est à dire avec la démocratie, selon le mot de David'). Michel 1989, p. 68.

71 See Foissy-Aufrère 1989, p. 18.

72 See Michel 1989, p. 67.

general, and almost metaphysical: the idea of *History*. The dynamism of the brushstrokes saturates the canvas with some kind of immediacy: it turns history into a living thing, while in general it is frozen by the coldness of the glaze (*glacis*).⁷³ In other words, History blends with the present: it becomes visual and tactile, while the smooth finish imprisons it into the immobility of a concluded past.⁷⁴

In the portraits mentioned earlier, David had already employed the technique of the *frottis*, or of making the painting seem like torn fabric, through vigorous brushwork. And this technique, associated with the idea of a moment experienced and possibly of proximity to the figure, was also used by Fragonard, a painter from the generation before David, and by Mme. Vigée-Lebrun, Marie-Antoinette's favourite portrait painter.

However, David's enhanced use of this procedure in a painting of the historical genre is something new. In this case, it makes explicit a new concept of history, sought after since *The Tennis Court Oath*: that of the historical moment directly witnessed and raised to exemplary sublimity.⁷⁵ Heroic conduct, which is the theme of *Bara*, is outlined in the imponderability of the experienced moment, in which courage and love of the republic were affirmed beyond the will to survive. In other words, the challenge of the painting consists in synthesising the lasting aspect of memorable conduct and, simultaneously, the open-ended nature of the moment.

73 The *Le Petit-Robert* dictionary explains: '*Glacis* [glasi]. n. m. [1757; from *glacer* (to freeze)]. A thin layer of colour, transparent like ice, applied on already dried colours to harmonise the nuances and make them brighter' ('*Mince couche de couleur, transparente comme une glace, qu'on étend sur des couleurs déjà sèches pour en harmoniser les teintes et leur donner plus d'éclat*'). See Robert 1979, p. 868. Accordingly, the entry also constitutes by itself an involuntary explanation, of course, about the academic model of history painting as a way of masking conflicts.

74 ('[L]a touche devient le vrai motif du tableau. Sa vibration insistante jusqu'à l'effet véhicule une double métaphore. La première est directe: l'idée du combat. La trace du pinceau en restitue l'animation – on dirait presque la fumée. Elle évoque à elle seule le désordre de la bataille sans tomber dans le genre inférieur de la peinture militaire. La seconde est plus générale, et presque métaphysique: l'idée de l'Histoire. Le dynamisme de la touche sature la toile d'une sorte d'immédiateté: elle rend l'Histoire vivante, où la fige d'ordinaire la froideur du glacis. En d'autres termes, l'Histoire se conjugue au présent: elle devient visuelle et tactile, où la finition lisse l'emprisonne dans l'immobilité du passé révolu') (author's emphasis). Michel 1989, p. 67.

75 See 'The Hemicycle: The Image of the Nation-Form' in this volume.

What did David paint, then, when he depicted the young Bara? Not an inanimate corpse, but a revolutionary and virtuous republican, and, as the painter said at the Convention, someone very close to nature.⁷⁶ In short, he painted immortality and historical eternity. David: 'he [Bara] dies, to live forever in the celebrations of history'.⁷⁷

Voluptuousness.

76 See David 1989, p. 158.

77 ('il [Bara] meurt, pour revivre à jamais dans les fastes de l'histoire'). Ibid., p. 159.

The Returns of Regicide

Translation by Henrik Carbonnier,

Reviewed by Renato Rezende

Critical Archaeology

When considering Manet's oeuvre and the history of *modern art*, most people avoid the discussion of the motif of the execution of Maximilian of Habsburg, yet Manet returned to the theme several times. It is often said to be merely a circumstantial exercise and not representative of his work. The fact that Manet returned to the subject at least five times between July 1867 and 1869 shows the opposite.¹

Indeed, an accumulation of absurdities about these works has built up over time, practically burying them for observers unaware of their history. Thus, it is necessary to remove these obstacles – real extracts from ideological slogans and historiographical clichés – sedimented in layers that comprise various historical and geological strata, in order to unveil them. Let us begin this archaeological critique by examining some of the misconceptions of the period.

First, the currently accepted notion that the theme was chosen accidentally is refutable, because Manet simply did not give such careful and insistent attention to any other theme. He lingered over it for around two years. The distinct, successive versions are more a work in progress than a set of supposedly equivalent works, such as Monet's series of views of the Rouen Cathedral (1894). In synthesis, the final canvas, now in Mannheim, is the result or corollary of a progression. Manet never exhibited the preceding works.

1 In all, there are four known canvasses and one lithograph: (1) circa July–September 1867, oil on canvas, 196 × 259.8 cm, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts; (2) circa September 1867–March 1868, oil on canvas, 193 × 284 cm, London, National Gallery; (3) 1868, lithograph, 33.3 × 43.3 cm, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum; (4) 1868–1869, study, oil on canvas, 50 × 60 cm, Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek; (5) 1868–1869, final work, oil on canvas, 252 × 302 cm, Mannheim, Städtische Kunsthalle.

My intention is not to diminish interest in these preliminary works, but to emphasise the systematic effort that guided the process of pictorial construction through to its conclusion. The painter attributed an emblematic status to that painting in the context of his oeuvre.² As such, it constitutes a poetic *summa* from which we must extract the assumptions and aesthetic development.

Contrary to the widespread idea that Manet's painting was indifferent to the theme, and thus apolitical, the painting was the object of prior censorship and, judging by the dates in question, had probably been so before the final version was concluded. In January 1869, the artist was notified by the authorities that the canvas or any related lithographs could not be exhibited – a fact denounced by Émile Zola in an article for *La Tribune* (4 February 1869).³

The piece's opposition to the Second Empire was clear to its contemporaries. Why, then, did this meaning, which was inherent to the theme, become inadmissible or discomfiting for the majority of those who studied Manet's work after his death? The fact is the motif's political material went unacknowledged, as if it were accidental and not the fulcrum of a systematic development.

The difficulty encountered by these early interpreters – the majority of whom were historicists and formalist historians – is understandable ... No wonder! What else could these historians possibly do when faced with a series of highly political paintings, after having sustained and disseminated the idea that Manet's work was, according to the formalist perspective, non-narrative in character and indifferent to its themes – in short, proto-abstract?

In fact, a similar difficulty is presented by another set of Manet's works, which are also highly political: the lithographs of 1871, which depict Paris besieged by the Prussians, its barricades and the subsequent massacre of the Communards. This time, the censorship was not enforced by the regime of the Second Empire, engulfed by the Prussians at the Battle of Sedan (1870), but by its succeeding, oligarchic republic.

Consequently, the majority of *modern art* historians possess a blind spot: on the one hand, we have a set of paintings with historical themes – works Manet elaborated as the result of evident and systematic efforts, as was the case of the 'lithos' of 1871 made in the risky situation of the extermination of the Commune

2 According to Juliet Wilson-Bareau: 'Manet considered it [the final version of *The Execution of Maximilian*, 1968–1969] one of his two or three most important paintings and, in a list of his works, drawn up in 1872, he valued it at 25,000 francs, alongside *Le Déjeuner sur l'herbe*' (Wilson-Bareau 1992a, p. 69).

3 On 7 February 1869, the *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* also noticed the censorship. See *ibid.*

during the Bloody Week.⁴ On the other hand, we have the specialists' blind refusal to see their importance to the painter.⁵

This paradox endures despite the growing attention that these works have been garnering since the exhibition of the complete series, in parallel with other examples from his production with political materials, at the National Gallery in London (July–September 1992).⁶

The phenomenon persists due to another layer of resistance or way of negating these works, which must now be analysed.

New Aversions

The regime of negating the canvas is the third point in need of examination. So, we can distinguish two regimes of refusal subsequent to the political censorship mentioned above. The first form of negation arose posthumously and was linked to the prestige of opticalism, or the 'school of the eyes' [*école des yeux*] as it was then called. According to that perspective, Manet's work was connected to impressionism: the 'school of the eyes' paradigm. Thus spread the notion that the themes of Manet's paintings were anodyne or mild, along the lines of impressionist themes, which would make his attention to historical scenes something of an anomaly compared to the rest of his work.

This negation is the work of the ideological apparatus constructed by official art history (largely formalist and historicist), the correlated critique and congeneric museum directors. As regards the critical legacy, their obscurantist influence has been more effective, persuasive and longer lasting than the French government's acts of censorship. The latter were national in scope – and so, in 1879, the painter sent the still unexhibited canvas (ten years after it was finished!) to the United States, to be exhibited in New York and Boston. The dominion of the formalist negation of *The Execution of Maximilian* had an international reach and was resistant to all evidence.⁷

4 According to a letter by Mme. Morisot, who fiercely censored the painter's involvement with the Commune, Manet would have been rescued moments before being shot alongside other *communards* and his friend, Degas, thanks to the intervention of his brother-in-law Tiburce Morisot, who assured the repressive troop from Versailles of the two painters' bourgeois origins. See Cachin 1991, p. 100.

5 Of note is the work by Nils Gösta Sandblad, which I was unable to consult and would seem to be the first dissidence against the formalist consensus. See Gösta Sandblad 1954.

6 See Wilson-Bareau 1992a.

7 After the 1879–1880 US exhibition and Manet's death in 1883, the canvas was, so to speak,

The Dogma of Athematic Art

The dominance of the opticalist-formalist doctrine in the interpretation of the painter's work and all *modern art* led Manet's work to be converted into the cornerstone for athematic and anti-narrative art. Thus, the realist significance in Manet's work – which, in fact, originated from the fertile romantic-realist nucleus of French art, including Géricault, Delacroix, Daumier and Courbet, among others – together with *The Execution of Maximilian*, was concealed under the neo-Kantian, formalist-positivist *diktat*.

For them Manet's painting appeared to be radically innovative because of its lack of all thematic significance or for presenting itself in supposedly 'anti-illusionist' terms. According to this view, André Malraux, a literate art lover and Gaullist Minister of Culture, claimed of the canvas on the Mexican episode: 'It is Goya's *The 3rd of May 1808 in Madrid*, minus what this painting means'. This idea was even taken up by the heretical author and dissident of Surrealism Georges Bataille, in a moment of conformism, when he cited Malraux's reasoning – notwithstanding their radical political and aesthetic differences – ratifying it in his book *Manet* (1955).⁸

We come now to the fourth layer of accumulated incongruities that persist despite recent changes. Traditional modernist formalism has fallen out of favour, substituted by multiculturalism or the various eclecticism of the 'post-modern' wave. The reopening of Manet's file came about with the centenary of his death in 1983, and its various commemorative exhibitions organised when the formalist paradigm and the lofty position enjoyed by modernism, both associated with abstract art, fell before the 'post-modern' ascension. Since then, there have been several 'contextualist' interpretations, referring Manet's works back to their originating ties.

Contemporary Aversions

However, the problem of disavowal persists. An exemplary symptom of this can be seen in the MoMA exhibition (2006–2007), whose catalogue sought to contextualise *The Execution of Maximilian*, erratically multiplying the references

forgotten until its reappearance in London in 1898. In France, the first exhibition of *The Execution of Maximilian* would only happen in 1905, at the *Salon d'Automne*, in Paris. See Leighton and Wilson-Bareau 1992, p. 113; see also pp. 69–70.

8 See Bataille 1983, pp. 45–53.

in various directions while failing to recognise its republican political significance.⁹

The Execution of Maximilian is still disallowed, negated or seen as an exception or accident; never as a moment in a system, that of the construction of Manet's historical and realist perspective. Today, the fact that Manet's work includes semantic interest has already been accepted, due to the partial contributions of the 1983 exhibition catalogues and, especially, T.J. Clark's studies, the first of which was published in 1980.¹⁰

Nevertheless, the discomfort felt by historians underwent a metamorphosis and is now transformed into the problem of explaining the cold, distant manner in which Manet painted the shooting as an act belonging to a matter of State – one that sent shockwaves through the press and Europe's monarchies.¹¹

Manet executed his Maximilian over several attempts, notably improving the solution each time ... The first version began in the weeks following the firing squad's action. The sources available at the time were indirect, unlike those used for most of his other work, which came as the result of direct observation (as is the case with his 1871 lithographs on the Commune).

The first *Execution of Maximilian* was nourished from material gathered from the press, that is, the melodramatic and sensationalist articles by news-

9 See Elderfield 2006.

10 See Clark 1987 and 1989b.

11 This event also affected Brazil's monarchical circles, but the Brazilian public at the time had the possibility of following a very distinct perspective on the Mexican process against the Habsburg invader through the various critical chronicles by Machado de Assis (1839–1908); starting with Maximilian's coronation, published in the *Diário do Rio de Janeiro* newspaper, on: 20 June 1864 (see Assis 1961a, pp. 17–27); 10 July 1864 (see Assis 1961a, pp. 37–46); 24 January 1865 (see Assis 1961a, pp. 276–286); 7 February 1865 (see Assis 1961a, pp. 303–312); 21 February 1865 (in this article, the author was forced to tone down his opinions, see Assis 1961a, pp. 293–303); 21 March 1865 (in this and the following article, of 11 April 1865, Machado was obliged to include, alongside his articles against Maximilian, two letters signed by a supposed 'Friend of the truth', contesting his arguments and defending the imperial regime in Mexico, under the protectorate of France, see Assis 1961a, pp. 331–347; pp. 361–370). Furthermore, there are references in the poems 'Epitáfio do México' (Assis 2006, p. 22), included in *Crisálidas*, and 'La Marchesa de Miramar' (Assis 2006, pp. 43–45), about Carlota, Maximilian's wife, included in *Falenas*. The first comment, made in passing, can be found at the end of the article about the death of the actor and man of the theatre João Caetano (1808–1863), published on 1 September 1863 (Assis 1961b, pp. 169–178). My thanks to Iná Camargo Costa for indicating Machado's chronicles. I am also grateful to José Antonio Pasta Jr. for the bibliographic diligence on the poems.

paper correspondents, the drawings reconstituting the facts, the photographs that gradually arrived from Mexico, and so on. However, Manet's work cut against the grain, developing a sense and discourse that differed from its source materials. It evolved systematically into a cold and distanced treatment of the subject, as can be seen when comparing the successive versions. The process, while systematic, became enigmatic for the majority of (formalist) historians ... Why?

The tendency of the bourgeois ideological apparatus in interpreting art – that is, that of the official critique and historiography practised in the central countries, as well as in its dependent, derived forms in the periphery – merges into two lines of resistance to the canvas that comprise authentic 'defences', in the psychoanalytic definition of the word. In this sense, such defences prevent or block any effective interpretation of the painting.

These defences have deep roots among French and English historians, but they can also be found elsewhere on account of their implication of two taboos: 'the death of the [ancestral] father' by the primitive horde, and the legitimisation of revolutionary violence against tyranny. The first of these defences takes form in the mute, albeit generalised and active, resistance to *regicide*.

Manet painted the regicidal scene with the coldness of a routine task. We cannot but remember Marx's irony in the opening of his *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852) when he characterises the coup of 2 December 1851, which enthroned Napoleon III, as a farce.¹² So, in Manet's canvas, the figure of a non-commissioned officer mechanically loading his weapon for the final shot, without even looking at the unfolding events, underlines the predictable contents of the act, relating it to the application of a law to end a notorious case of fraud and usurpation.

Kidnapping and the Unmarked Grave

In summary, if the painter worked on the execution of the tyrant in order to discharge its pathos and to characterise it as a repeatable act, its reception nevertheless took shape in an opposite direction. Thus, traumatised, deep down, the reception sought to adjust itself by denying or refusing to recognise the painting's motif.

12 'Hegel observes somewhere that all the great events and characters of world history occur twice, so to speak. He forgot to add: the first time as high tragedy, the second time as low farce' (Marx 2002, p. 19).

Simply put, both historians and part of the public, positioned contrary to the painter, noted the *regicide* and censored (in the psychoanalytic sense) the pictorial legitimisation of the real situation in the painting. Next, to preserve its value, they came to disassociate the painting from the historical fact. Denied and fetishised, the painting fell into the abyss between Manet's historical judgement and the bourgeois anti-regicidal ideology held by art historians and collectors.

As a consequence, and in recognition of the capital value of Manet's work to *modern art* history, the subsequent working over of the painting – denying its meaning while attributing a formal sense to it – did not fundamentally change the tenor of its reception. What emerged was a mere compromise of interests. The new interpretation that was established, while seeming to accept the painting, essentially maintained the denial of the *regicide* and confined the canvas to the narrow circles of anti-narrative or 'anti-illusionist' language.

Ultimately, this strategy has something in common with the kidnapping of babies, snatched from their parents who were imprisoned or murdered as political prisoners, to be raised by families with opposing political leanings. The Argentine military dictatorship (1976–1983) serially employed the practice, which was said to have started with the Falangists in the Spanish Civil War. Within the history of *modern art*, dominated by bourgeois class dictatorship, the symbolic kidnapping of Manet's canvas was not an isolated incident. We must 'break into the vaults' of official historiography.

Undesirable Prediction

We know that the events that took place between August 1792 and Thermidor, in July 1794, which included the *regicides* of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette in January and October 1793, respectively, were harshly condemned. There were some exceptions, such as the Marxist historiographical school of Albert Mathiez, Georges Lefebvre, Albert Soboul, and Michel Vovelle, among others. Among the bourgeois intelligentsia, including the social democrats, the Girondin maxim of 'finish with the Revolution' prevailed against its continuation through the expropriation of private property, as set out in *The Plebeians' Manifesto* (1795) and the Conspiracy of the Equals (1796), of Gracchus Babeuf and his companions.

An example of this is official art history's proscription of a certain sample of the work by Jacques-Louis David, wherein his paintings of the revolutionary years of the French Republic, from 1792 to 1794, were classified as 'unfinished' or

as circumstantial sketches; arguments that led to their marginalisation – they were assigned to a kind of poetic minority.¹³

Manet's canvas suffered, and continues to suffer, a prolonged interdiction because it reopened a Pandora's box of the worst nightmares experienced by not only the aristocracy, but also the bourgeoisie who (like Macbeth) ended up identifying with the values of the class they dethroned.

Worse than just an undesirable prediction, treating the fall of empires as a routine process, as Manet did, entails a corrosive and dangerous irony. Manet's banned canvas expropriates the epic appearance from the neo-Bonapartist bourgeoisie and their successors, downsizing them to the mere expression of a temporary business success, primitive accumulation or colonial piracy.

The second reason for blocking the canvas's historical interpretation comes out in reaction to this motive. It consists in refusing the legitimacy of revolutionary violence in the decolonisation process. Such refusal is widespread among art historians from the central economies and it echoes their governments' foreign policies.

It is necessary to stress this point: that the painter's empathy with the Mexican revolutionary republic and his support for the death penalty – imposed on the tin pot tyrant enthroned by the armies of the imperialist creditors (France, England and Spain) allied with the landowners, enemies of the Reform movement led by the republican Juárez – have never been duly considered by art historians. This is despite their argumentative misery and lack of reasonable explanation for the coldness and distance provoked by the canvas (with the exception of the argument-censorship and *ex machina* of the supposed anti-narrative content of Manet's canvas).

Maximilian embodied colonial restoration, updated in Mexico's financial subjugation to the European financial system: in concrete terms, the negation of the sovereign right to the moratorium of an independent and decolonised Mexican State.

13 For an example of this position, see Schnapper and Sérullaz 1990. Certainly, it is part of French museology's vigilance around and confinement of David's work, to maintain them at the Louvre – where the 'unfinished' works seem like deviations or accidents – instead of at the Musée D'Orsay, where the company of other modern works would confer to these so-called 'unfinished' works a precursory and effective tenor, and not an anomalous one, as the official historiography would have us to believe. That Courbet's formerly damned *L'Origine du Monde* (1866) has already found a place of honour at the Orsay – unlike David's republican works – speaks well of the new place held by sex, now included in the capitalist *laissez-faire*. At the same time, it shows the interdiction that presides over the regicidal origin of the First revolutionary Republic.

In other words, lacking a throne in Europe the Habsburg was nothing less than an emperor for hire, a puppet of the predatory agreements made by bankers and neo-colonial speculators. It is very curious, or rather symptomatic, that such a phenomenon does not even cross the minds of official art historians! This amply demonstrates who they serve and to what purpose!

Manet and Baudelaire

Let us leave behind the genealogy of misconceptions! Historical truths and accuracy are of no interest for official art history, being the accomplice to acts of primitive accumulation at the root of the world's large museum collections. Nor are they of interest to the 'pax romana' of the curatorial routine that holds sacred private property and celebrates private collections.

Let us instead focus on Manet's production process. What was the painter's point of view at the time? According to the estimates, the first version of the canvas dates to the period between July and September 1867.¹⁴ Following the execution, the painting began at the same time as Baudelaire's deterioration in health. The latter had been a decisive interlocutor for Manet.¹⁵ The writer's agony began with a collapse at the end of March, prior to his death on 31 August of the same year.

It is not my intention to establish a parallel between the two deaths, whose significances could not be more antithetical to Manet. In fact, Manet's contemporary painting of Baudelaire's funeral (*The Funeral*, 1867), in contrast to the coldness of his work on Maximilian, is one of the sharpest and most poignant examples of *modern art* to that point, or even to today. Manet evokes the loss of a friend in a direct and instantaneous manner, within a fragmentarily outlined funeral procession.

The choice of an emblematic historical theme and its development occurred during the pain and grief Manet felt for his friend. It is unlikely that they would

14 See Wilson-Bareau 1992a, pp. 51–55. The execution took place on 19 June, but news only reached Vienna, by cablegram, on 29 June. Napoleon III received the news from Vienna, also by cablegram, on 1 July, the date the emperor was to personally present the International Exposition awards. However, only on 5 July would the president of the Assembly officially announce, in Paris, the death of Maximilian – a personal political disaster for the II Bonaparte, the clumsy plotter of the adventure.

15 For an example of both the ascendancy and proximity between Baudelaire and Manet, one need only look at the letter from the former to the latter, dated 11 May 1865, from Brussels (Baudelaire 2009, pp. 339–341).

be unaffected by such a process. And to assess the power and effect of these circumstances we need only look at an analogous situation: the decisive essays written by Baudelaire shortly after the death of Delacroix.¹⁶

In Manet's case, what relationship existed between his grief and the choice of historical subject? Would it be unreasonable to think that, faced with the loss, the young painter, aged 35, would feel the urgency of a step: the continuation and full achievement of his lost friend's project? Such a step would imply – and why not? – the elaboration of the historical subject in tune with Baudelaire's critical programme: to construct an epic that would be cosmopolitan – or internationalist, as it would later be called – urban and anti-bourgeois, politically and ethically committed; to be worked on not by artists or virtuosos, whom the poet despised, but by 'men of the world'.¹⁷

Modern Epic

What did Baudelaire understand by this counterpoint? In *The Painter of Modern Life*, a belated essay published in 1863,¹⁸ the same year the young Manet presented *The Luncheon on the Grass* (*Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, 1863) at the Salon, Baudelaire established what he understood to be *modern art*, at least in part.¹⁹ But the writer had sensed the need to reformulate the idea and practice of art since the beginning of his activities as a critic.²⁰

Thus, an awareness of the origin of *modern art* already appeared in one of Baudelaire's first critical texts, 'Le Musée classique du Bazar Bonne Nouvelle' (1846), even before his poetry. For the critic, *modern art* must be epic and founded on the 'severe lessons of revolutionary painting'. In this way, *The Death of Marat* or *Marat Breathing his Last* [*Marat à son dernier soupir*], as David

16 In this regard see 'The Conspiracy of Modern Art' in this volume.

17 For the counterpoint between 'man of the world' and 'artist', see the following, as well as the discussion ahead.

18 *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne* was published in three parts, in *Le Figaro* (26 and 29 November and 3 December 1863). Regarding the counterpoint in this essay between the 'man of the world' and 'artist' types, see Chapter III, 'L'artiste, homme du monde, homme des foules et enfant', immediately preceding the decisive 'La modernité' (IV) and 'L'art mnémonique' (V) in Baudelaire 2002n, p. 689. For an excerpt of the section and a discussion of its typology, see below.

19 See 'The Conspiracy of Modern Art' in this volume.

20 '[T]he heroism of modern life surrounds and harries us ... There must be the *painter*, the true painter, the one who knows how to extract the epic from modern life ...' (Baudelaire 2002a, p. 407).

initially intended, would constitute the origin of *modern art* or, to employ another formulation from the young Baudelaire, the 'austere affiliation' of 'romanticism, this expression of *modern society*'.²¹

Baudelaire's text is vibrant, enlightening and unparalleled as an announcement of the tensions that would come to a head in 1848. However, there is no time for us to go beyond the founding role Baudelaire attributed to David's *Marat Breathing his Last/The Death of Marat*. With a young and sincere exuberance, the writer described 'David's masterpiece' as an 'unusual poem', a 'donation to the desolate nation' and the landmark of *modern art*.²²

Painting and Crisis

What to say about *The Execution of Maximilian*, in light of David's *Marat Breathing his Last/The Death of Marat*? And what to say about it in light of *The Coronation of Napoleon and Josephine* (*Le Sacre de Napoléon*, 1806–1807)?²³ Indeed, in the fourteen years between David's two paintings, French history changed several parameters across the world. However, what matters to us is the kinship between Manet's canvas and elements from both of David's works: the direct view, close to the facts, evident in *Marat Breathing his Last/The Death of Marat*; and the ambivalence and glacial irony of *The Coronation of Napoleon and Josephine*.²⁴

In effect, the scenery and motifs of these three paintings could not be more diverse; in fact, they comprise political acts with totally antithetical historical implications ... What could there be in common between the paintings of the murder of a republican revolutionary leader, the farcical, yet *de facto* coronation of a modern *Caesar*, and the execution of a fictitious emperor – an idle, fraudulent puppet of majestic heritage, dubious power and decadent fortune?

21 See Baudelaire 2002b, pp. 409–410.

22 Ibid. For details, see 'Marat by David: Photojournalism' in this volume.

23 Manet's direct attention to David's pictures is revealed, I think, by at least two of the former's paintings: *Olympia* (1863), borrowing from David's *Mme. Recamier* (1800), and *Déjeuner dans l'Atelier* (1868), which incorporates elements from the scene in David's *La Douleur d'Andromaque* (1783). Regarding the latter example, see Fried 1996, p. 105; for similar ties connecting Manet to David, see also pp. 95, 160, 351–352, 497 n. 170. For the relationship between *Olympia* and *Mme. Récamier*, see also 'Two Scenes on the Commodity' in this volume.

24 For the ironic and satirical dimension of *The Coronation ...*, with its social climbers in their 'Sunday best', somewhere 'between Goya and Balzac', see Michel 1988a, pp. 105–107.

Nevertheless, despite all the differences, one can see that Manet's canvas and the two paintings in question share a new pictorial mode, one opened by David's works during the Revolution, but also boosted by the experiences developed by Géricault, Daumier and others. In synthesis, these three pictures imply the notion of *history* as knowledge and praxis, as a new field, both for human action as well as for painting.

The three canvases completely escape the moulds of academic painting of the historical genre, which are hypocritically edifying and based on neoclassic clichés or references to ancient history. Nor are they close to the hundreds of epigones of the restored academies, such as *pompieri* like Meissonier, who swarmed throughout the nineteenth century, painting military scenes with backgrounds stretching out to infinity – as the 'heroic' Stalinist standard would also do in the following century.

On the contrary, David, Goya, Géricault, Daumier and Manet painted directly, from up close, *history* in motion, as something nearby and open to the activity of the *subject*. They refer to *crises* or prominent public controversies, combined with points of view and pictorial *facture* developed by artists who are supposedly autonomous and responsible, even when working on a commission to the king, as in Goya's case. The paintings therefore focus on contemporary characters through new discursive procedures, such as the critical analysis of current times and totalising, reflexive synthesis.²⁵

Since the French Revolution, painters have been working in this field, then recently de-theologised, alongside writers, historians and thinkers; such was the well-known relationship between Manet and Michelet.²⁶ They all participate in the process of building a new discursive and cognitive sphere: that of *history* as a series of crises and the object of common, open, rational and critical knowledge permeated by class conflict and attendant ideologies.

The Executions ... in Progress

In synthesis, the progressive process experienced in the various versions of *The Execution of Maximilian* has the sense of a 'reflection in progress', through the pictorial work combined with a totalising, critical judgement.

25 For more on this new research field Foucault called the 'ontology of actuality', or the 'ontology of ourselves', see Foucault 1994b, pp. 562–578, 679–688.

26 For the ties between Manet and Jules Michelet, the romantic historian who, in his *History of the French Revolution* (1846–1853), started to redeem the Revolution in which the anonymous heroism of the people was given value, see Fried 1996, pp. 130–131, 404.

The first canvas, now in Boston, seems to evoke a sudden vision and the imaginary, sentimental experience of a chaotic or disordered act. It involves a nervous and uncertain way of working. Figures appear as indistinct shapes, with typically Mexican outfits.

Possibly influenced by the newspapers he read, Manet seems to suppose that Maximilian's shooting resulted from a riot or a sudden act on the part of guerrillas or a peasant militia, but never an action by the regular army of the Mexican Republic, presided over by Juárez.

The independent and republican Mexican State's *raison d'état* for judging and executing the invader and his local accomplices – which had become the object of censorship in the main European newspapers – can already be seen in the second canvas, now in London, of which we have only fragments that were gathered posthumously. In these terms, it already features certain elements of the definitive version: the composition is organised, the soldiers belong to an official army with uniforms similar to those of their European counterparts.

In summary, the picture now shows an act of State and of martial law, not of a chaotic popular rebellion. The colours and their limits clearly define the bodies, things and their parts. The composition delimits the platoon's position using strokes similar to those found in the definitive version, including those relating to the non-commissioned officer standing to the right of the canvas, who had been sketched out in the first version, but who is now shown clearly loading the rifle to conclude the execution with the final shot.

The main differences between this version, which belongs to the National Gallery in London, and the final version reside in the natural environment around the figures. The elevated line of the horizon, emphasised with light tones, the relief of the ground and the intense blue sky disseminate a radiant light to the scene. This lends it a certain sublime and yet ironic quality as everything is saturated, in the manner of the popular Catholic prints of the lives of saints. The effect of the composition as a whole thus suggests the implication of nature's lifeblood, which acts as the main witness to the drama, without being contrasted by any buildings or manmade structures.

By pretending to lend a voice to nature, Manet gets close to one of the constitutive elements of Goya's *The 3rd of May 1808 in Madrid* (1813–1814),²⁷ in which a rise in the background terrain seems to envelop the patriots with a

27 The Museo del Prado's visitor's book contains a record of Manet's presence, signed by him on 1 September 1865. The works of Goya exalting the insurrection were discretely exhibited in the museum's corridors. See Wilson-Bareau 1992a, pp. 45–47.

consoling blanket, while the sombre, lugubrious sky floats above the scene. In these terms, Goya's painting of the execution contains a judgement and pathos, attributed to the theatre of nature.

However, in Manet's sketch, now in London – that possibly constitutes the second version – the meaning of the natural element is ambiguous and uncertain, or rather, it is left in suspense by the irony of the false sublime.

In contrast, the final Mannheim canvas presents the organic quality of a systemising reflection; of a result in which the work of treating the different components of the work in a unified manner considers itself concluded. Everything unites and is reciprocally determined and, despite the complex, encompassing tenor of the implicated elements, results in a compact set of meanings. The visual field and point of view, which had already been sketched out in the first version, induce a closer look at the facts than in Goya's painting.

Close-up: a Republican Principle

Manet had already utilised the close, direct look that suggests a lively and intense proximity – at a body's or even arm's length away, between the foreground and the observer – in *Olympia* (1863). As a pictorial device, this way of seeing goes back to David's *Marat Breathing his Last/ The Death of Marat*, Diderot's critical programme and more remotely, Caravaggio. It proposes the idea of the observer's direct participation in the scene.

In the case of politically charged paintings, such as *Marat Breathing his Last/ The Death of Marat* and *The Execution of Maximilian*, this pictorial device assumes republican content, visually constructing the feeling of historical action in the first person. Later, Eisenstein, an accomplished narrator of macro history – as well as in the first person as a substitute for the collective – would frequently make use of this tactic.

According to the republican sentiment, the general tonic of the painting is strongly rational. The picture implies the execution as a historical requirement or logical necessity, all the while excluding the parties' pathos or the melodrama drummed up by the anti-republican, pro-colonialist and imperialist European media of the time.

To emphasise the act's political rationale, *The Execution of Maximilian* highlights the contrasts, disassociates colours, and determines their limits, specifying everything. The grey, geometric wall in the background – a solid and objective image of the law as an insurmountable construct – grabs the observer's attention. Limited by this solid plane, we can just make out in the background a glimmer of the sky, some trees and a slice of land in the distance.

In Goya's *The 3rd of May 1808 in Madrid*, the sky and ground frame the human gesture. By contrast, the built surroundings in *The Execution of Maximilian* determine the reflexive apprehension of the act. Of note are the clean ground, the solidity of the wall and the social order of the objects placed by man. Here, it is neither nature nor the transcendental sphere of the sublime that produces the scope of significance, but a political and spatial order.

There is also a Chorus, although it is shorn of the dramatic tenor seen in the one Goya included in his picture, which empathises with the executed patriots. Manet's work features some commoners, perched on the wall displaying curiosity or indifference, with only one showing any emotion. The composition underlines the absence of drama, an absence that is highlighted in the busy figure of the officer in the foreground and to the right.

Republican and Anti-Bourgeois Painting

Nevertheless, formalist historians – the historicists of art – surreptitiously ignored and obscured the political meaning of Manet's glacial irony by treating a new case of magnum regicide as routine for the French public. The execution affected, in a single blow, the Austrian imperial House of Habsburg (emblematic of the Ancien Régime on a European scale), as well as Napoleon III, the mastermind behind the Mexican Empire farce, wrought through the mating of a Habsburg and the local landowners. Furthermore, the formalist historians stated that Manet's painting *froze* the scene portrayed, *because it intended to autonomise itself* from the narrative function (sic)!

Thus, *The Execution of Maximilian*, according to formalist interpretation, does not imply any historical judgement or interpretation of an event. Instead, it carries a premise that would be valid for any subject. In this way, Manet is viewed simply as an anti-narrative artist, one who is supposedly interested in 'painting paintings' and nothing else.

In their haste to escape history, the formalists also ignored Manet's relationship with Baudelaire ... The latter was critical of 'specialist artists', 'dedicated solely to painting', seeing them as men chained to their palettes, 'like serfs to the soil ...' For Baudelaire, similar painters, disconnected from the political world, were no more than mere 'provincial brains', etc.²⁸

28 'When I finally met him (Constantin Guys), I soon realised this was not an *artist* in front of me, but a *man of the world*. Here, I ask you to consider the word *artist* in a very limited sense and the word *man of the world* in a very broad sense. *Man of the world* means a man

The formalists and European historians²⁹ did not realise that the modifications or differences between Manet's work and Goya's canvas constitute precise and determined measures that correspond to distinct, if not inverse, meanings formulated by the two painters.

To draw out the contrast, if Goya's intent was to invoke repulsion to the shooting, then Manet elaborated the scene with an ironic coldness in keeping with the outcome. This quality is deliberately reflexive. It was preceded by David's coldness when he captured the figure of Marie Antoinette, enemy of the Nation, being led to the guillotine through the streets of Paris, on 25 Vendémiaire Year II. In the drawing *Marie Antoinette on the Way to the Guillotine* (*Marie-Antoinette Allant à l'Échafaud*, 1793), David expressed his political position as a *regicide*.

All in all, the formalists' fallacies and blind conservatism prevented Manet from being considered as much an heir as Daumier and Courbet, of the *regicide* and revolutionary sentiment of the First Republic.

The proof that Manet does not abstain from meaning, but in fact orients it in line with his understanding of the theme, becomes evident in his images of 1871 on the massacre of the members of the Commune. The Bloody Week, in May 1871, happened less than four years after Maximilian's execution.

To represent the summary executions of the Communards, Manet utilised the same compositional structure from the picture on the republican triumph in Mexico. But this time he inverted the meaning and dramatic values. Here, in defence of the victims, Manet approaches the dramatic intensity of Goya and Daumier, in the facture and luminosity. Accordingly, he depicts the Commune facing the platoon with arm raised in defiance of the executioners from Versailles.

of the whole world, a man who understands the world and the mysterious and legitimate reasons for all uses; *artist* means a specialist, a man chained to his palette like a serf to the soil. Mr G does not like being called an artist. Is he not a little justified? ... Artists experience very little, or even nothing of the moral and political world. ... Save for two or three exceptions whom need not be named, the majority of artists, one must say, are very skilled brutes, mere manual labourers ("des brutes très adroites, de purs manoeuvres"), village pub talkers with the minds of country bumpkins ("des intelligences de village, des cervelles de hameau")' (Baudelaire 2002n, p. 689, original emphasis).

29 With a certain perplexity, John House refers to what he calls the picture's ambiguity and even considers the Mexican reasons for the execution, yet without effectively making progress in interpreting the work from a republican perspective. However, he escapes the general trend of apolitical interpretations, including that of Juliet Wilson-Bareau, the book's organiser (see House 1992, pp. 87–111). For another, possibly distinct position, see footnote 5, on the interpretation by Sandblad.

In its various versions, the watercolours and gouaches, as well as the lithographs,³⁰ the work emphasises the plebeian sacrifice and courage, in addition to the condemnation of the slaughter.

In these works, the windows of Paris are witnesses to the scene. Here, however, unlike the stern Mexican wall confronting the fatal destiny of the tyrant and his accomplices – who fabricated the farce of the Empire against Juárez's Reform – the chequered quality of the windows in the background does not appear coldly geometric. Instead, they seem like a face, expressive and sympathetic to the Communards' resistance. The windows, these witnesses of the Commune, like a memory tainted by the sense of things, come to life in the gaze of the observers.

They appear to stare intensely at us.

30 See, for example, Manet, *The Barricade* (1871, 46.2 × 32.5 cm, silverpoint, black ink, water-colour, gouache, Budapest, Szépművészeti Múzeum); *The Barricade* (1871, 46.8 × 33.2 cm, lithograph, London, The British Museum); *The Barricade* (1871, sheet [Chine]: 48.5 × 33.2 cm, stone: 53.2 × 41 cm, sheet: 70 × 54.8 cm, crayon lithograph on chine collé, rare trial proof, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts).

Parisian Scenes

Against the Tide

Most of Manet's work has been subjected to formalist historiographical interpretations. His group scenes and portraits are no exception. These interpretations have predominated since the bourgeois restoration that began in the last third of the nineteenth century, combining *laissez-faire*, colonialism, and financial expansion – a cycle initiated with the 1871 Commune massacre, which some called the *Belle Époque* – and lasted until the 1970s, when formalism gave way to the eclecticism of so-called 'postmodernism'.

For the formalists, from Julius Meier-Graefe to Clement Greenberg, Manet's work was fundamentally athematic or proto-abstract. Their presentation followed the basic neo-Kantian doctrine of 'pure visibility', as proposed by Konrad Fiedler, an amateur aesthete, art lover, collector and *marchand*.¹

Those historians and critics regarded the choice of themes as irrelevant to Manet's art, which they claimed involved the emancipation of painting from narrative function.

Manet, in this sense, was heralded as the pioneer of the destruction of 'pictorial illusionism'. That is, he is said to have rejected not only the centrality of the theme in his compositions, but also the grammar of chiaroscuro and depth. Presumably a precursor of 'flatness' and of anti-narrative painting, Manet was regarded as the 'ground zero' of *modern art*, taken as abstract and fundamentally self-referential art. Clearly, from this perspective, questions over the meaning of Manet's portraits and Parisian scenes are beside the point.

First, against the tide of such interpretation, my research assumes the critical and inventive action of the painter on the pictorial language of his time as much as the radical republican content of his work. I will try to show that the innovations in language he introduced and his choice of themes form a unity; this pictorial coherence involves an innovative practice of painting that is inseparable from a critical synthesis of the historical moment.

Manet's specific pictorial innovations – either those highlighted in the misleading views of the formalists, or others they were unaware of – were necessary

1 On the formalist view of Manet's work, see Martins 2007, pp. 11–22.

to critically consider and pictorially reflect the rising tide of the new system of commodity production.

What were the tensions surrounding the aesthetic work in that context? What gave the critical and pictorial structure such force? What distinguishes such portraits and scenes of life in the rapidly changing metropolis from paintings by his predecessors and contemporaries?

Physiology of Disenchantment

Manet studied the international tradition. He made trips to Italy, Spain, and the Netherlands to visit museums and to learn about other matrices of European painting. His operations of displacement, inversion or rupture with the pictorial codes were not fortuitous; they had critical and reflexive consistency and were conceived as historical assessments of the pictorial tradition. Throughout his formative period, with the painter Thomas Couture, Manet kept in close contact with historian Jules Michelet, whose portrait was painted by Couture in 1843. Michelet was also close to the Manet family.²

Let us start with Manet's portraits. They carry a certain *inexpressiveness* or indeterminacy. The faces show intimate states of uncertainty, empty physiognomies, and behavioural signs of *dissociation*, visible even in the most evasive eyes.

Dissociation, evasiveness, inexpressiveness ... What does this unusual mixture of negative qualities encompass? The question is especially pertinent when we consider how much time it took and how difficult it was – both in antiquity and from the Gothic in late medieval times onwards – to develop the terms for a dialogue in painting capable of emotional expression and of engaging the inner or subjective realm.

The apparent indeterminacy of the subjective dispositions, which dominates Manet's group scenes, is very different from the promises (of seduction, melancholy, and so on) typical of Watteau's *fêtes galantes*. In Manet, the meaning of the action and communication in the faces and bodies is voided. The result is a painting of *disenchantment of the self* or the *emptying of spontaneity of the self* as the real origin of the actions.

2 For details, see Fried 1996, pp. 118–123, 128–131, 142.

Negative Painting

Undoubtedly, this directly contradicts the character of his pictorial annotation and his brushwork, which exudes the vigour, spontaneity, and sensation demanded by Baudelaire.³ But this contradiction is only apparent. It can be explained on other grounds.

What is the meaning of the *inexpressiveness* that Manet gives his figures? To elucidate this paradox, it is useful to confront his figures with those from the other paintings that revealed the historical genesis of individualism and the visual structure of the classical subject. Manet's portraits follow in the tradition of Dutch painting; similarly, they include the instantaneity of the 'snapshot', typical of Chardin who was also an admirer of Dutch realism. But Manet *overcomes and dialectically negates* these sources. How does he achieve this?

The human types of Dutch paintings opposed the unreal, imaginary or abusive content of Baroque paintings, in vogue in the absolutist courts of the time. They distinguished themselves by precision, functionality, and an interest in fulfilling some small task: pouring milk, reading a letter, playing an instrument, etc. (see Vermeer's paintings, for example). Similarly, even in Hals's scenes of dissipation and profligacy,⁴ the characters reveal strong internal cohesion while expressing joy. There was a sense of individual presence, inherent in that historical moment. Such signs matched the secularism, the simplification of means, the nascent but general belief in the *faculty of judgement*; they expressed the sense of full existence. In short, the phenomenon echoed the confidence in the institution of economic freedom implemented in the Netherlands, and denoted the rationalism and supposed universalism of bourgeois ethics that infused a new value to the power of judgement and to individual life during the seventeenth century.

In turn, atony is at the heart of the subjectivities in Manet's pictures. Detached from everything, absent from themselves and from their surroundings, the attitudes outlined by the *modern painter* have nothing in common with the concentrated and powerful attention of Chardin's types or those of the Dutch tradition.

Let us also consider that *inexpressiveness, evasive gaze, and dissociation* – the negative qualities of Manet's characters – can be seen beyond any one face,

3 See 'The Conspiracy of Modern Art', in this volume.

4 See, for example, from Frans Hals: *Young Man and Woman in an Inn/ Yonker Ramp and his Sweetheart* (circa 1623) and *The Gypsy Girl (La Bohémienne)*, circa 1626).

achieving general and objective value as an aspect common to all portraits and Paris scenes. In this case, we might be witness to an 'objective form', which comprises a 'practical and historical substance' – this is an idea coined by Roberto Schwarz, which he based on Antonio Candido's notion of a form that implies, in its specific aesthetic consolidation, the structural reduction of the 'social situation' or 'generalized rhythm' of society. Thus, social process does not appear as in the artwork as depiction of historical conditions, but as an active internal element, an 'aesthetic formalization, with its own specific dynamic'. That is to say, for Schwarz, social process appears simultaneously as a consistent result of society and also as an inner power of the novel.⁵

In such a perspective, the pictorial forms of *inexpressiveness*, *evasive gaze* and *dissociation* – deficiencies in Manet's work, in the minds of critics at the time – reveal what Manet saw as the customary and specific models of subjectivity and sociability prevalent in Paris during the Second Empire. Again, what are the implications of this?

'Modern Life'

Baudelaire's critical and reflexive work was influential beyond the realm of art. He also helped establish the general meaning of *modernity* for Manet. Though overlooked by the formalists, Manet maintained an intense dialogue with the critic and poet, whose early career in art criticism precedes Manet's painting by nearly fifteen years and, therefore, contributes, in some ways, to the preparation of the latter.

What is the root of the notion of *modernity* in Baudelaire? Beyond the anti-classical motto of Diderot, 'you have to move with the times' ('il faut être de son temps'),⁶ which paves the way for Baudelaire, it must be noted that

5 See Candido 2004, pp. 28, 38; an English translation is available: Candido 2014. For Schwarz's comments on the subject, see Schwarz 1989, pp. 129–155, especially p. 142; see also Schwarz 1999, pp. 24–45, especially, pp. 28 (for the stereoscopic perspective of Benjamin), 30–31 (for the notion of substance), 35–36, 41. An English translation of Schwarz on Candido is also available: Schwarz 2012. Given the contiguity with the other elements implied in the relation between Manet and Baudelaire, it is worth noting that Schwarz highlights an analogy between Candido's concern with establishing a 'practical-historical substance' of the aesthetic form and 'Walter Benjamin's *stereoscopic* investigation, with its accuracy, for example, about the importance of the market mechanism in the completion of Baudelaire's poetry' (Schwarz 1999, p. 28, original emphasis).

6 Apud Argan 1983b, p. 346.

Baudelaire's notion of *modernity* dates from long after the *Lumières*. In this sense, on account of the unprecedented and accelerated process of urbanisation, which Baudelaire pointed out so insistently, the necessary parallel relates to at least three crucial points of the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), according to France Vernier.⁷

Baudelaire's first work of criticism concerned the 1845 Salon. Born as an appraisal of the pictures exhibited in the Salon, and based on Diderot's discursive and critical standard,⁸ Baudelaire's historical and aesthetic reflection gradually moves away from the specific works to acquire a more totalising tenor. This occurs in a series of works whose apex will be the essay 'The Painter of Modern Life' ['Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne'], published in three parts in *Le Figaro* (26 and 29 November, and 3 December 1863). This was precisely when Manet sends the work *The Luncheon on the Grass* (*Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe*, 1863) to the Salon. Just a coincidence?

In his reflection, Baudelaire uses the term *modern art* from the outset. The term is possibly borrowed from Delacroix, who also uses it, albeit in a vague way. Baudelaire's use evolves into a particular understanding of *modernity* as currentness and as an unprecedented historical structure. The critic will progressively outline a schema for a new art, which he calls 'modern', a transition from romanticism to an 'epic' of new times.

Three points are crucial in this case and demand reflection: (1) *modern art* is linked to *modernity*, so reflection on aesthetics and history are inseparable; (2) the concern with both will be permanent and their elaboration will develop reflexive progress over the course of the critic's work; and (3) this reflection will always have a dialectically negative character – whose emblem will be Satanism⁹ – before the existing social and symbolic order (for instance, see the links with the *Communist Manifesto*).

In Step with the *Manifesto*

In the passage where the *Manifesto* highlights the inherently revolutionary and simultaneously destructive character of the bourgeoisie – which constantly revolutionises the means, the relations of production and social ties – the proximity between the analyses is remarkable.¹⁰ Three mottoes from Baudelaire's

7 See Vernier 2007, p. 63; see also Martins 2007, pp. 23–27.

8 See Diderot 1996b, pp. 169–1005.

9 On the Satanism of Baudelaire, see 'The Conspiracy of Modern Art', in this volume.

10 'The bourgeoisie cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of pro-

aesthetic chime with the passage in question: the *ephemeral* as a *modern* trait; general *circulation*, incessant movement as typifying *modernity*; and finally, destruction, which accompanies modernisation according to the logic of capitalist development, driving Baudelaire's appeal to a tragic sense as a nexus of *modern art*.

Therefore, Baudelaire's sense of the ephemeral is inseparable from the tragic. From this synthesis we may distil the *epic* which he calls *modern*, that is, the combination – outlined in 'Of the heroism of modern life'¹¹ – between the 'transient', in plain sight, and the 'eternal'. The latter is perceived from a satanic-materialistic perspective as an objectified absolute, or is taken as *history* or the tragic memory of destruction, the quintessence of modernisation, as would be analogously emphasised by both Marx (in the *Manifesto*, two years on) and Benjamin (in his theses on the concept of history, around ninety years later).¹²

Tragic negativity as a nexus of *modern art* opposes the positivity and banality of bourgeois everyday life, which Baudelaire ceaselessly berates. Thus, what could be more antithetical to Baudelaire's conception of *modern art* – founded on the revolutionary and republican austerity of David's painting in Year II and linked to the memory of the massacre of the 1848 revolution¹³ – than the bucolic, pastoral, and urban hedonistic motifs, the frivolous instantaneity and fragmentation, which are at the heart of the impressionist paintings? Contrary to what has been accepted when one affirms that Manet was the first impressionist painter, Baudelaire performed the negation of impressionist art *avant la lettre*, so to speak. He elaborated his antithesis in advance.

duction, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society. Conservation of the old modes of production in unaltered form was, on the contrary, the first condition of existence for all earlier industrial classes. Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life and his relations with his kind' (Marx and Engels 2005, p. 44).

11 'All the beauties contain, like all possible phenomena, something eternal and something transient, – absolute and specific' ('Toutes les beautés contiennent, como tous les phénomènes possibles, quelque chose d'éternel et quelque chose de transitoire, – d'absolu et de particulier'). Baudelaire, 'XVIII. De l'héroïsme de la vie moderne', in Baudelaire 2002c, p. 493.

12 See especially Thesis IX on the 'angel of history', in Benjamin 2005b, pp. 60–62.

13 See 'The Conspiracy of Modern Art', in this volume.

In short, the feelings of the impressionist 'joie de vivre' mark the wake-up call of the so-called *Belle Époque*. In turn, the first explicit manifestation of *modern art* – and of the *epic* and the *tragic* combined as *modern* traits, according to Baudelaire – is to be located with *Marat Breathing his Last/ The Death of Marat* (1793) by David, the emblematic artist of the Revolution.¹⁴

Duct-City

The destructive metabolism of the new social order was in plain sight: the renovations of Paris under Napoleon III devastated the urban centre of the capital and evicted 350,000 inhabitants (according to official figures) for the construction of a network of avenues, pavements and shop windows in which commodities and troops would freely circulate. It was a mega-operation of *recolonising* the urban territory, as denoted in the statement by the renovation manager, Baron Haussmann (1809–1891), who affirmed that the city would no longer contain inhabitants, only 'nomads'. In this city, transformed into a system of ducts and shop windows and urbanistically 'armoured' against barricades, the empire of *circulation* was thus established.¹⁵

If Manet's idea of *modernity* implied such a complex of meanings, then what might we infer from the pictorial summaries of *inexpressiveness*, *evasive gaze* and *dissociation*, hypothetically 'objective forms' related to modern subjectivity and sociability?

Circulating Beings

Through such negative qualities, painting maps the new *position of the self*. This reflects the restructuring of the subject according to the pace of change in Second Empire Paris. *Evasiveness* between individuals and *dissociation* of the group echo *inexpressiveness* and subjective emptying. In the group scenes of consumption or leisure, among the loose individual faces some look at the painter and then at the observer, as if asking something. In these cases, helplessness, laxness, and perplexity constitute more than a feeling or subjective accident, becoming a structural function, a new principle of subjectivity. The

14 See Baudelaire 2002b, pp. 409–410. See also 'Marat, by David: Photojournalism', in this volume.

15 See Benjamin 2003, pp. 373–400; see also Löwy 2006, pp. 59–75; Clark 1989a, pp. 23–78.

expressionless faces illustrate the end of authentic psychic motifs and group relations, in short, the dismantling of the decision-making power of each, as well as of social cohesion.

In these terms, could they make up a sketch of the visual representation of self-estrangement or of the so-called state of 'alienation'? Let us examine this hypothesis. In literature, the phenomenon had already been detected about a century earlier. We need only consider Rousseau's third letter to Malesherbes (26 January 1762), in which he describes the acute and unspeakable feeling of self-emptying, even amid the joy of isolation in nature.¹⁶

Let us suppose we found a hypothetical reason for self-estrangement or for the state of alienation among the effects of *modernity*, distinguished by Baudelaire. Let us remember that he was a decisive interlocutor for the painter. According to this perspective, we see at the heart of the atony of Manet's figures the impotence, the feeling of being dragged before an incommensurable phenomenon that nullifies everything. To what could such impotence be attributed? How to specify such an all-encompassing force?

According to Baudelaire, the experience of *circulation*, an all-embracing automatism, hypothetically emerges as a universal condition and as a general mode. Now, it is known that unforeseen proximities and incidental companionship appeared as inherent in the new Parisian situations. This is reflected in the reports at the time about the influx of people to department stores and mass amusements, as well as the movement of passers-by. Perhaps Manet detected the visual signs of the new forms of contiguity that ran contrary to the codes of the estates of the realm – factors of an older, more rigid spatial order that mirrored social stratification.

In effect, the palace, the borough, the village and its residents were set apart; they only communicated by exception and through rituals. However, in the

16 '[My imagination] created in my fantasy a golden age and moved me to tears when I thought of the true joys of humanity, of those joys so delightful and pure that are now so distant and apart from men. However, amidst all this, I confess that I sometimes felt a sudden affliction. Even if all my dreams had become a reality, that would not have sufficed; I would have continued to surrender to my imagination, to my dreams and desires. I found in me *an inexplicable emptiness that nothing could fill; an impulse of the heart towards another kind of happiness that I was not able to conceive and to which I did, however, look forward*' (emphasis added). Rousseau, 'Third letter to Malesherbes, January the 26th 1762' ('Terceira carta a Malesherbes, 26 de janeiro de 1762') [Hachette, x, pp. 304–306], apud Cassirer 1999, p. 85. See note 62, p. 85, by Cassirer, which signals in one of his quoted sentences a change introduced by the German author to shorten it. However, it does not change the meaning in relation to what matters here.

Paris of the Second Empire, of the great avenues and parks, of crowds and shop windows, of world fairs and of the cafés concerts, all people came and went or assembled around endlessly circulating goods. People no longer worked where they lived. The urban renovation eliminated artisans' streets and working-class districts.

From Tragedy to Farce

Thus, in Manet's Paris, a prototype-capital of the current shopping-mall-cities, everything is without roots. Everything circulates and is exchanged. Situations and relationships come about speculatively, like a relationship between discontinuous terms, which enables the artist to similarly elaborate any *montage*. Freedom of this kind is practised in the dioramas and photographic studios, where one can pose in front of exotic backdrops and stage all kinds of 'phantasmagorias'.¹⁷

Thus, Manet's portraits and Paris scenes not only express the intense *circulation* which made the boundaries between castes more flexible; they also initiate the picturesque scenes, Manet's studio paintings, typical *staged* scenes, also called 'Spanishnesses' – situations with Hispanic motifs, in vogue on account of the empress's Iberian origin.

Faced with these obvious incongruities, the formalists affirmed that Manet's scenes *were not intended to narrate* (sic). In such terms, they could explain the fake bullfighter, a pseudo-guitarist, a dead Christ with an overwhelmed expression, uninterested or unconcerned angels – in short, an endless list of unconvincing characters. The unity of the picture seems to crumble. The Spanish motifs were still typified in the early Goya; yet, in Manet, they are no longer viewed as genuine.

Let us rephrase the question: what is the reason for the incongruities? Is it cynicism, as some contemporaries pointed out? Perhaps, a dismissal of painting as a way to know the world, as the formalists claimed? Or finally, is it Manet's *critical judgement* of a historical process – the end of the authenticity of national traits – and of certain art, which had lost their historical substrate?

Why not suppose, then, that the effect of *inauthenticity*, analogous to *inexpressiveness*, signals a historical cycle? Which one? If we grant Manet critical

17 On the notion of 'phantasmagoria' as analogous with the commodity and its determinant role in the urban experience of Paris in the nineteenth century, see Benjamin 2003. See also Buck-Morss 1991, pp. 110–158; Crary 1998.

astuteness and reflection, he will aim at a typology of decidedly ill-fitting connections. His negative scenes – only ironically ‘Spanish’ – will be authentically Parisian in his desire for them to look like something else, true in their lack and falsehood or in their ‘phantasmagorical’ approach, to employ Benjamin’s terms. With a slapstick touch, such canvasses combine the parody of the masters, like Velázquez, and the portrait of a Parisian idler. A female model represents a sundry of picturesque scenes. ‘Men’s magazines’ do the same thing today. The relation of these canvasses with phantasmagorias of photographic studios is not coincidental, but strategic.

To what end? In the falsification of the typical, by exposing the gap between countenance and role, Manet stresses the complicity that will soon emerge as a habit. It marks a link with the logic of the dioramas and other amusements of the time, which Hollywood exploited in resorting to actors who have nothing in common with the roles they play.

Serpent’s Eggs

Far beyond the order of the spectacle, this process implies a broad social reorganisation of labour. This had already been underway in England, but it only started to be implemented in France with the political rise of the proprietary bourgeoisie in 1791 (which dissolved the workers’ guilds).¹⁸ It would then be consolidated with the renovations of Paris during the Second Empire, and completed with the Commune massacre, when during the ‘Bloody Week’ (May 1871), at the behest of the bourgeois Republic installed in Versailles, between 30,000 and 40,000 people were slaughtered with support from the Prussian invading troops. It was the beginning of the *Belle Époque*, in which legions of qualified workers, master craftsmen and their work teams were exterminated by bayonet and firing squads.¹⁹

18 A series of measures, implemented in 1791, put an end to the corporative regime. Thus, the d’Allarde Law (2 March 1791) abolished privileged guilds and manufactures, according to the principle of free enterprise and free access to patronage: ‘From 1 April next, it will be free to every citizen to engage in whatever commerce, or to exercise whatever professions, art, or trade he may wish’. Weeks later, a second measure (23 April 1791), also attributed to the legislator Baron d’Allarde, abolished the posts of judge and master of corporations. The Chapelier law, voted on 14 June 1791, completed the work that established a new employer regime, prohibiting any coalition, mutuality and workers’ associations, as well as strikes. See Suratteau 2005b, p. 15, and Monnier 2005, pp. 294–295.

19 To the dead were added the deportees, the missing, and the escapees, in such a way that

Paris, then, underwent rapid industrialisation and restructuring of production, which, given the reduction of the working class in the city, required immigrant labour. Having witnessed Haussmann's renovations and the changing labour process, Manet was able to observe the continuity of the cycles, particularly in relation to the elimination of skilled labour. This combined with the magnifying glass of his painting meant that he was able to gather and examine the serpent's egg from up close.

How did he record this situation? From the mismatches between subjectivity and its function, constructed in the studio, there emerges a generalised vacancy of social roles, mobility, and availability of the figures. All are ready for whatever use comes their way. Hence the indeterminacy and uncertainty in the faces, worked on by the painting which elides contours and details: the girl-actress or chantress is a prostitute, and vice versa; the art critic, an investor, and vice versa; the scientist, a collector; the journalist, a ruler, etc.

The intrinsic dissociation between subject and function is inherent to the social division of labour and to the practices of the market. Manet distinguished such signs as manifestations of a general process because the renovations of Paris *produced* the mobile and tool-less labour force, that is, the *abstract labour force*.

In fact, by removing the workers from the city centre in order to transform the old neighbourhoods into circulation ducts, the renovations pulverised the old-age home-and-workshop unit, the organic coexistence of dwelling and workplace. In this way, their function was analogous to that of the *enclosures*, the fencing of portions of communal land in England, already consolidated during the seventeenth century.²⁰

In France, the late conversion of craftsmen and apprentices into unskilled labourers or modules of *abstract labour* was prepared by the planned urbanisation, which expropriated workshops and homes en masse. Like the ground

the report 'L'Enquête des conseillers municipaux de Paris sur l'état de main d'oeuvre de la capitale', from October 1871, estimated that more than 100,000 workers were 'killed, imprisoned or on the run, now missing in Paris'. One should add that this figure 'does not include the women' (apud Soria 1971, pp. 43–50). The passage also includes the report of General Félix Appert who, in the next four years, kept accounts of the arrests and convictions made by the military justice, classified according to crafts and professions. To an observer from a different time, the survey also serves as a record of the numerous handicraft activities that would disappear due to the reorganisation of the production process according to industrial models.

20 See Marx 1990a and 1990b. For concrete records of class clashes involving the *enclosures* in England in the seventeenth century, see Hill 2001b, pp. 36–71; see also Hill 2001a.

and underground of Paris, eviscerated by the demolitions, the logic of progress possibly stood out to the painter.

The urban renovation catalysed the laws of the ongoing process and laid bare its structural face. With the extensive reorganisation of the labour process into wage labour, the crafts were no longer underpinned by familial, historical or geographical links. They ceased to be passed down from generation to generation. Migrating from one's native region to seek employment elsewhere became widespread and a constitutive factor of the metropolitan centres as an agglomeration of anonymous and rootless crowds. The historical emergence of the 'free labour-form', or of the worker with no means of production, redefined as *abstract labour* taken to the market, is also the emergence of its structural circulation *abstractly put*, in the absence of any concrete determination.

Such was the extensive and radical dissolution of the organic link between subjectivity and social role. From the dawn of humanity until the end of the craftsmen's guilds, this link had played a major role in fostering gregariousness, sociability, and subjectivation. Henceforth the structural gap between subject and function took centre-stage.

Beings for Transit

In this way, it is clear why Manet's portraits come with no psychology. Unlike those by Daumier and Courbet, Manet's portraits carry no behavioural, psychological or associated traits. His painting records the nascent massification as an abstraction of subjective histories and concrete personality traits. Through such a prism, the *inexpressiveness* of the characters is equivalent to their mutability or to their being prone to circulation; in other words, to their configuration as *abstract labour force*. In the Parisian portraits and scenes, Manet exposes the laws of the market: everything is a circulating medium and potentially exchangeable, moving toward the general equivalent, the money-form. In it, despite their organic and metabolic roots, the transient and the contingent, as sets of experiences and social relations, crystallise into the objectified abstract form of (exchange) value or currency units. They are converted into a general standard.

The historical truth embodied in the *overall process* of social life is not, in this case, sedimented in individualities; rather, it consists in the extensive restructuring of subjectivities according to a scaling process. Manet's schematic and cursory modelling, achieved through few and quick brushstrokes, grasps such a shift or conversion of metabolic factors into abstract forms, reducible to a unit

of value that works as the equivalent for all forms whose variations are distinguished only as differences in price.

So the formalists did intuit something (albeit vaguely and confusingly) when they claimed that Manet's painting was headed towards abstraction. But on account of their fetishistic view of the social process, they were completely wrong when they assumed that it was painting, and not the social process itself, that was autonomous and headed for abstraction. By forging new narrative or pictorial-discursive modes, Manet's realist painting sought to effectively map this social change.

Scene by scene, portrait by portrait, a procession of bottomless subjectivities parades in Manet's canvas, inasmuch as they are mediated by abstraction. With no significant landmarks, these subjectivities, through Manet's eyes, appear as modules; they are *prostheses of transitional identities* or incessantly remade identities. The waitresses who serve, the gentlemen who drink, the couples who walk, one lady who skates and another who reads ... where do they come from? Where are they going? Who are they?

If the determinations of origin neither count nor can be observed except as false, the destination of all of them is clearly evident in the *indeterminate* faces and postures, as well as in the programmatic *improvisation* of the pictorial facture: they are transit beings, they are intended for *circulation*. They are the passers-by or *nomads*, apud Haussmann. Therefore, in the analysis shared with Baudelaire, the structure of the public sphere, idealised during the *Lumières*, is redirected to the incessant mutation of circulation; this is the matrix form in which the eternal and the transient are modes of the same.

Currency-Mankind

Thus, Manet's materialistic vision and facture do more than escape the academic norm – through *improvisation* – the form of the ephemeral, of the fleeting sensation. Instead, they pose, in a *materialistic* key, the *radical shift of the human* converted into the value-form.

A series of individual portraits focuses on the pause: motionless workers or consumers. Doing what? At rest and in a moment of pause, being alone emerges as emptiness – a visible form of automatism, a *habitat* of the market, of the abstract force with no means of production and subjected to the wrath of 'free competition'.

The order which models the being *for-circulation* also models non-being, or the coming of apparent suspension, non-circulation as impotence and self-absence. In the apathetic and stunned face, when the only remaining form of

identity is suspended – that of the *being-for-the-market*, mobile for production – the redefinition of the individual takes the form of mere *abstract labour force* and nothing more. The drunk, the beggar, the chantress, the waitress, the art critic, the politician, the notable, the poet, the writer, the painter, etc., during a pause in their activities, all resemble one another. Thus, illustrious politicians such as Gambetta, Rochefort, Clemenceau, portrayed through Manet's synthesis, rejected the canvasses.

In effect, over and above individual portraits, fragments of a new social fabric are laced together as a sign of another productive order, which is depicted in an unprecedented mode in painting as an 'objective form' of subjectivity. For Manet, the *evasive and inexpressive*, neutral and flexible subjectivities, offer a panoramic view of the abstract high streets of the market, enhanced in the gaps and in the convertibility of each into a *being-for-exchange*.

In these terms, there is a neutralisation of the individuality that had given rise to the rich diversification of Balzac's *The Human Comedy* in the first half of the century, or the mark of Daumier's caricatures in the former regime of Louis Philippe. Even when the portrait subjects could allow a special definition – in 1866, the critic Zacharie Astruc; in 1868, the critic Théodore Duret; in 1866, 1867–1868, Suzanne Leenhoff, his wife, and, in 1868, Léon Leenhoff, his son; in 1876, Stéphane Mallarmé; in 1879, Manet himself; in 1880, Émile Zola; in 1880, the critic Antonin Proust ... – nothing distinguishes them in their physiognomy or in their gaze. Their only residual particularity is to be found in a subtle form of vigour or the contained despair with which they carry a book, a brush, materials for work or some other end, always in vain.

In short, the *structural mutation of the human condition* and the general transformation of an action's meaning are synthesised as a general disposition and re-qualified for *circulation* and *convertibility*. As such, Manet's key-form – and this determination will be his brilliant move, perhaps one step beyond Baudelaire – is the *commodity*, the 'elementary form' of the new society, as stated in the famous sentence of the first paragraph of *Capital*.²¹

21 'The wealth of societies in which a capitalistic mode of production prevails appears as an "immense collection of commodities"; the individual commodity appears as its *elementary form*.' (Marx 1990c, p. 125).

Social Meat

In the market-city, where everything circulates and situations and social relations arise speculatively as random relations between discontinuous terms, everything (or almost everything) is possible, since everything tends to transmute into its equivalent. However, nothing ceases being mediated or *commodified*, regardless of the time and the form of mutation or destiny. The double nature of living beings – things and their relations, both concrete and priced abstractions destined for the market – constitutes the governing structure of the new historical order. This was assumed to be natural or eternal, but Manet was able to glimpse its negation in the tragic brevity of the Commune, in which he participated.

In this process of survey and visual determination of the structure of the commodity, Manet's *Olympia* (1863) took on the character of a manifesto. It corresponded to a synthesis or corollary of several portraits of women workers that he made from 1862 (year of a great world's fair) onwards.

Olympia made explicit the visual structure of the labour-*for-sale*, and therefore of the *commodity*. Let us end with this provocation.²²

22 About *Olympia*, the outcome of a visual cartography of female work and the starting point of Manet's visual reflection about the commodity-form, as well as about *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (*Un Bar aux Folies-Bergères* (1881–1882) – a panel in body scale which possibly carries the first critical and reflexive judgment in painting about forms in general in the market era –, the last canvas in the historical genre by Manet, concluded shortly before his death (which, incidentally, occurred in the same year as Marx's)), see 'Two Scenes on the Commodity,' in this volume.

Two Scenes on the Commodity

Bodies without Flesh, Bodies of Flesh, and Others

Olympia (1863) has the character of a manifesto (in the form of a poster). The painting synthesises the many portraits of women workers Manet made beginning in 1862.¹ It depicts labour-for-sale and therefore the *commodity*, as we will see.

But painting is a practice and, as such, is not limited to the formulation of ideas. In this sense, *Olympia* does much more, as a mode of painting or work of facture, than portray the commodity-form (which, by the way, was no small thing at the time). In relation to the modelling of the body and to the expression of various substances, it takes a decisive step towards the elaboration of *materialistic* body morphology.

Let us begin with the latter. If it were a genre work, *Olympia* would be taken as a nude, and as we know, since Antiquity constituted the nude one of the central themes of the Western pictorial tradition. In classical pagan culture, the nude, as a deified form and manifestation of an idea, alluded to the harmony and perfection of nature. By the sixteenth century, during the so-called Renaissance, the spiritualising nature of Christianised neo-Platonism transformed the nude, a form inherited from the classical world, into a primordial allegory of the spirit.

A study by Panofsky shows that in Titian's *Sacred and Profane Love* (c. 1514), the clothed Venus corresponds to 'profane love', to the lower values of immanent and sensitive beauty. The nude, 'sacred love' in the painting, represents the *nuda veritas* (naked or essential truth) of intelligible and ideal beauty. The *nuda veritas*, as an allegory of the spirit, was a recurrent figure in neo-Platonic art and in Baroque rhetoric. The nude was employed in this way by Botticelli, Raphael, Michelangelo, and Titian, etc.

To begin with, it is precisely the allegorical and spiritualised value of the neo-Platonic nude that is mocked in *Olympia*. Like the colours used by the painter, which are raw, opaque and lacking in harmony, this nude also rejects classical precepts. The body in focus, despite the ironic title – *et pour cause* – does

¹ See, for example, Victorine Meurent (1862), *The Street Singer* (*La Chanteuse de Rue*, 1862), *Gypsy with a Cigarette* (*Gitane avec une Cigarette*, 1862), *Lola de Valence* (1862).

not derive from mythological figures; rather, it arises from very real motives: the great expansion of prostitution in Paris after the renovation of the city, as detailed by Clark.²

By breaking the rules, *Olympia* indeed follows in the footsteps of Courbet, who in turn seemed to be encouraged by the challenge launched by Manet. In 1866, Courbet painted the now celebrated *The Origin of the World* (*L'Origine du Monde*, 1866), which seems to double the stakes on Manet's despiritualised or *materialistic* nude. In a sort of duet with Courbet, Manet's painting, by focusing on the body, also emphasises the physical aspect of the erogenous zones. And while other volumes and contours – forehead, chin, nose, cheekbones – are carefully depicted in the conservative painting of a portrait artist such as Fantin-Latour, in Manet's work faces often have their less relevant features suppressed or eliminated, simplified as if in a caricature. Manet generally emphasised lips, ears, eyes, and nipples with vivid colours and striking brushstrokes. They become the focus of attention, as can be seen in *Olympia*. What does that mean? Smooth faces, vivid organs, like plugs?

Manet does not just reject conventional contours, the carefully drawn modelling à la Ingres – the linear form used in conjunction with chromatic modulation – to model bodies and organs, which in general come subsumed in the body's contours. He goes further. To the outrage of defenders of 'good painting', Manet replaces the acceptable standard of the contour drawn by thick layers of paint or by vestigial brush marks.

Amid the uproar over *Olympia*, Baudelaire remarked that Manet was inaugurating the period of painting's 'decrepitude'.³ In effect, the *desublimation* of painting, through the replacement of the abstract content of the line by the visceral concreteness of the chromatic mass and of brush 'scratches' on the painting, is comparable to the brutal sincerity of reinforced concrete and other modern architectural elements that reveal a building's structure and its fundamental tensions. Thus, the linear-tonal form, which in tradition imagistically evokes the referent, gives way to a physical record (of the painter's gesture). In Manet's description of the nude, this also acts as an annotation of the psycho-physical energy of the libido that flows and multiplies in the erogenous zone in question. Thus, the viewer's gaze is led not to the conventional image or to the optical representation of a mouth, but to the *tactile sensation* of the annotation, pervaded by the physiological fact, that is, the thrill of possible imminent lip contact. *Oral drive!*

² See Clark 1987 and 1992; see also Clark 1989b.

³ '[Y]ou are but the first in the decrepitude of your art ([V]ous n'êtes que le premier dans la décrépitude de votre art)'. Baudelaire 2009, pp. 339–341, original emphasis.

In fact, Manet initiates a withdrawal, the undocking of the organs, as the body is deprived of the unity of the narcissistic image. To conclude, Manet's *materialistic* view of the body as a system of erogenous zones foreshadows not only a Picassian morphology, but also Freud's structural reading of subjectivity as a system-economy.

For Sale

In *Olympia*, the *desublimation* of corporeality is accompanied by innovations in posture and the *mise-en-scène* of the nude. These changes attest to the symbolic value of the traditional topos. Also in the description of the surroundings, of the furniture, and of the accoutrements of the nude, Manet's painting flouts the conventions of academic tradition and decorum. The classic nude rests on an unreal bed or floats over ethereal materials, emphasising the exclusive condition of the object of contemplation. This is the case with the sea in *The Birth of Venus* (*La Naissance de Vénus*, 1863), for which Cabanel, Napoleon III's favourite painter, won the Salon of 1863 competition. It is also evident in the woods, clouds, etc., surrounding the deities of academic art. By contrast, where is the Parisian Olympia – a young and very secular sex worker – positioned?

The sheets are painted crudely and are almost palpable. They seem to be pieces of fabric available to consumers over-the-counter. They penetrate the eyes of the viewer. And given the physical dimensions of the canvas (130.5×190 cm), nearly actual scale, the sheets, whose dimensions are perhaps even slightly enhanced in relation to Olympia's body, physically wrap the observer.

As such, the first encounter of canvas and the observer is more corporeal than visual. Before Manet, Courbet had already expanded the scale of his canvasses to achieve a greater realism. Manet stresses this process by shortening the point of view, through the close-up, which seems to *impel* the observer towards the bed.

To all this is added a riddle which challenges the viewer and calls for deciphering: Olympia's bed not only appears to be arranged in *tactile* terms, but is positioned very high up. Indeed, the bed eradicates the floor from the field of vision and therefore nullifies the spatial mediation, which traditionally – via a foreground with a visible ground or floor – stands between the observer and the pictorial scene.

To assess Manet's manoeuvre, an observer attentive to the history of painting may compare Olympia's situation with the situation of Mme. Récamier – from David's work of the same name (*Portrait de Mme. Récamier*, 1800) – who is also

reclining on a piece of furniture. The proportions in the two paintings are very different and surprising. One need not even turn to the previous case in order to sense the physical effect produced by Manet. What, after all, is this bed under Olympia?

New Intimacy

The bed stands out so much that it requires extra attention. As well as eclipsing the floor, the bed steals the scene, catches the eye, and turns almost into a pedestal; it ultimately interacts with the paraphernalia of seduction (flower in the hair, necklace, bracelets, satin slippers and high heels), which are themselves highlighted. Everything is consonant with the display of goods in a shop window, counter, or advertisement.

Life-sized, flamboyant and almost within reach, Olympia lies close and in 'real time' or *online*, all space abstracted. She is herself a product for sale and also a mannequin, a shop-window object. She embodies the cipher of commerce, the craft trick, whose art, the organised seduction of the department stores, already being implemented in Paris, would come to be widely disseminated.⁴ The trick is to have the goods whisper from the shelf or shop window, confiding to the soul of the passersby that they are theirs and theirs alone. Caught off-guard, without the shield of understanding, tempted before the realisation of judgement, those who pass by and see, and have the means, enter the shopping paradise.

The comparison with David's painting demonstrates Manet's precise aim, the intelligence with which he pictorially analyses the seductiveness of the commodity. David's canvas was made in the shadow of the coup of 18 Brumaire (1799), during Bonaparte's rise to the Consulate and in a period when the memories of the Revolution and of the ideal of equality were still very much alive. In the foreground, a particularly salient feature was the cold space surrounding the portrayed figure, a virtually *abstract* space – contrasting with the warm close-ups of David's paintings from the revolutionary period, such as *Marat Breathing his Last/ The Death of Marat* (1793) and others.⁵ In fact, Juliette Récamier, the wife of the banker who set up the financial scheme to support the Bonapartist coup, was an emblematic figure for the wealthy and the social climbers who rose to power with the Thermidor and who continued

4 See Benjamin 2003, pp. 371–400.

5 See 'Remains of Voluptuousness', in this volume.

to call the shots in the Directory period and later in the period of the Consulate, and so on.

In both the arrangement and the character of Olympia, what emerges is a new and distinctive phenomenon of the Paris of six decades later. Visually much closer than Mme. Récamier, *Olympia* provokes in those who see her an ambivalent state, similar to that of the passerby under the magnetism of the object in a shop window, counterbalanced by price as a condition for access.

Manet was able to present Olympia's attitude in ambiguous terms, like the dynamism of the goods on display that fill the gaze while imposing conditional access. Olympia's smile, stuck in her lips, vibrates in her hand – 'shamelessly flexed', according to one critic at the time. It is a hand that covers and reveals, deriding the viewer in the process. Her expression is somewhere between inviting and reticent, the breasts in full view, a relaxed hand as an offering, and the other hand determined as a denial. A scene of promise and demand is set: it is *the scene of a negotiation*.

Negotiation

Parisians were already familiar with the systematic charm of the commodity. In the 1840s, Balzac proclaimed: 'the great poem of display chants its many-coloured stanzas from the Madeleine to the gate of Saint-Denis'.⁶ In 1855, ten years before *Olympia*, the positivist Taine said of the International Exhibition of 1855: 'All Europe has set off to view goods'.⁷ And two years after *Olympia*, the international exhibition of 1867 received 52,000 exhibitors.

A *Mona Lisa* of the age of the commodity, the *Olympia* character displays the air of a sphinx, but with a look that is very different from the decorum of classical nudes. Olympia's gaze, indifferent to the bouquet offered by her first admirer, engages in direct contact with the passerby and openly offers herself.

While not as explicit as the scene of the negotiation, a similar look can be seen in many of Manet's other paintings. In them, the frontal look, generally from female figures, shortens the distance between the canvas and the observer; it defines the foreground as if in direct and *instantaneous* communication with the observer. This is the case in a series of paintings made from 1862 onwards, prior to *Olympia*.

6 Balzac, apud Benjamin 2003, pp. 376–377.

7 Taine, apud Benjamin 2003, p. 381.

Neither intimate nor strange, grounded in an apparently spontaneous and instant connection – though organised and staged, as Manet makes clear – such a look operates amid the new closeness born of *circulation*. This is also an intense display of goods and people. It signals the proximity between strangers, typical of the exchange of interests. Such a system reveals the flexible and ambiguous space of the transaction: it brings together by moving away, and it moves away by bringing together. It arranges the parties for *negotiation*. It weaves flexible bonds in the negotiated measure of possibilities, according to the interests of each, modelled for *exchange*.

If Manet depicts this gaze in so many of his figures, it is not because measuring and negotiating are peculiar qualities; rather, they involve every Parisian passerby, since the city, after the renovations, became a theatre or kingdom of the commodity. In his *Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx used the character of the prostitute as a metaphor or '*specific expression of the general prostitution of the worker*',⁸ doomed to sell himself as labour power.

Manet makes a similar comparison when he situates the prostitute's gaze in dialogue with each and every observer. Like the goods in a shop window, the image that pretends to observe the observer awakens in him a dialogue and reciprocity.

The experience of art and that of aesthetic pleasure converge with voyeurism, the visual negotiation of the offered goods, the price to be paid, and the fetishisation of visual goods. Implying in the aesthetic play the same kind of game occurring in the streets, *Olympia* sets the scene for a reflection about the *negotiation*, the general structure of the new Paris. Art becomes a form of totalising reflection, unveiling new forces and connections.

Political Economy

Establishing the nature of synthesis and manifesto in *Olympia* helps to clarify the emptying of subjectivity on which Manet focuses. They constitute aspects of a certain historical process.

In this sense, two decades later, Manet returns to the theme of purchase-and-sale, of look-and-deal and of the space mediated by the commodity-form. But now the element of play implied in *Olympia's* attitude, aiming at a deal, has vanished. With more signs of wealth, but unequivocally sad, the new scene is staged between *unequal* terms.

8 Marx and Engels 1960, apud Buck-Morss 1991, p. 430; see also pp. 184–185.

Let us turn to a new riddle-painting or labyrinth-painting: *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (*Un Bar aux Folies-Bergère*, 1881–1882). The title refers to a fashionable new place of entertainment. However, inasmuch as the literal name of the venue means something like ‘pastoral follies’, the title contains, like *Olympia*, a range of references to Arcadianism and, thus, to Classicism.

The riddle returns us to one of Manet’s central concerns: the sense of history. Again, it concerns the distinction between Classicism, or the mental world that has disappeared, and modernity, or the world as it is in its *present materiality*. The tension also advances an optical cut, given the *labyrinthine* complex of the images reflected in the mirror. In Manet’s canvas, this is interspersed with some other pictorial objects, allegedly drawn from concrete referents: the attendant and her paraphernalia, with showy products on offer at the counter. It may take some time before the spectator is able to situate himself in the semi-impressionist scene, filled with images and reflections. The composition, while seemingly evasive, gives viewers this time to think.

The somewhat labyrinthine complex multiplies visual stimuli – and, one may say, to today’s observer seems to anticipate the urban landscape of advertising. It poses a challenge to naïve realism, which relies on appearances, and with this it calls for intelligence. Where is the truth? What does the scene imply?⁹

Let us look at the narrated facts. The drama put in place is the opposition between the blank and dispirited look of the central character and ‘lit’ things, drinks, fruits, etc., that stand out, apparently endowed with life. Thus, the canvas presents a contradiction: reciprocally determined opposites, the contradiction embedded in a situation. In the scene, the attendant stares at an observer, a potential buyer, who can only be glimpsed in the mirror. The sad look of the attendant, totally emptied of herself, no longer carries the vivacity of someone who negotiates for herself, relying on ‘free labour’, as happened with *Olympia*, the gypsy, the street artist, or the Spanish Lola – all of them characters of ‘autonomous’ women workers and, at the same time, depictions of forms for sale.

With no power left to negotiate, walled in by goods and images that fluctuate in the mirror, the attendant, alone and amid the crowd – abstract and assumed, the iconic synthesis of the market – reveals the melancholy of someone who knows she is an abstract link of intense circulation. The blank look, the listless hands on the counter ready to serve the pleasure and profit of someone else – all carry the invisible shackles of someone for sale, living from their ‘free labour’

9 For those interested in alternative interpretations of the subject, assuming the painting as an optical labyrinth, see, for example, Duve 1998; see also Flam 2005.

and without any other means of support. What we see is just a residue of feeling, an open-ended process of *lack*, subjective energy, suppressed living labour transmuted into a *quantum of abstract labour* taken to the counter, like all other goods.

Having already depicted the commodity, here Manet elaborated its *pendant* and corollary: by exposing opposites, he achieved a dialectical analysis of the scenic system of value and circulation, of exchange and consumption, of labour-for-sale, widower of its own humanity.

Feminine Strength

Struggling against ataxia, an illness to which he would prematurely succumb, Manet accomplished here his final work-synthesis. Despite being ill and immobilised, he continued to paint for some time, usually flowers in jars, flowers of (his) evil, touching and *extremely material*.

In short, the canvas in question, in dimensions similar to the scene it represents, constitutes a panel. It is a small mural, its size being similar to the dimensions of wall mirrors, common in Paris cafés at the time. It also functions as a poster or *affiche*, an advertisement about life in the city. What does it say? On the counter, in the foreground, there are effulgent goods. In the background, the abstract image of an observer/consumer and the crowd which composes the market. In the centre, the eyes of the attendant, a vague memory, a dramatic remnant of suppressed humanity.

This contradiction, the core of the drama whose memory remains in the eyes of the attendant, is also the Ariadne's thread that allows the observer to escape the labyrinth, if he takes the work as a totalising dialectical reflection. It is not a light scene of mundane customs, as is often the case with the impressionists; rather, it is a historical painting, a mural, at once *epic* and *tragic*, of *modern life*, as Baudelaire intended. As such, it is also a living moment of the dialogue between Manet and Baudelaire.

I do not know whether Manet read Marx – they died in the same year. At any rate, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* can be considered the corollary of Manet's oeuvre, concerned with the life of the market-city – a vast desert, filled only with images, and incidentally crossed by columns of nomads.

If *Olympia* still carried in its ambiguity some measure of ambivalence regarding reciprocity and outcome, *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, in turn, in the contradiction it makes explicit, fully expresses *the end of the myth of free negotiation*. It clarifies the mythical foundation of liberal society as violence between unequals, and reiterates the point that labour is feminine.

Painting as Labour-Form

Preamble or Prehistory of the *Belle Époque*

A corollary of the process of social reorganisation for the production of commodities, consolidated in France during the nineteenth century, was the massacre of the Communards in the Bloody Week (21–28 May 1871). It completed the implementation of a new order of labour, founded but not concluded by previous policies.

Haussmann's renovations in the two preceding decades had transformed the face of Paris. The city had been systematically restructured and taken from the people, who from 1789 to 1848 had turned the city into an arena of almost permanent revolution.

It was not only a territorial conquest. The reach of the operation went beyond politics. It was largely economic, laying the foundation for a broad restructuring of society and of the means of production.

The major restructuring of the city was undertaken as a war strategy, recolonising the nerve centre of the national territory. In the process, it demolished working-class districts and extirpated the main urban centres of the house-workshop unit – the vital bridge that united under one roof the housing and working resources of many French craftsmen-workers. Deprived of their means of production, skilled workers and their assistants metamorphosed into 'free labourers', commodity-labour suppliers; a depersonalised and abstract labour force.

In addition to sanctioning the city's dominance through business and its transformation through speculation, the vast urban surgery served a similar function to that of the enclosures in England. By dislodging the old peasants and removing their right to the ancestral lands on which they lived, the enclosures achieved more than an act of plunder or wealth concentration. The enclosures produced a huge number of beings destined for wage-labour or 'free labour'. In this way, they succeeded in producing the labour force, essential for the Industrial Revolution.

In France, a latecomer to this process and animated by the memory of frequent revolutions, Haussmann's project for Paris met strong opposition. At the end of the second decade of the modernising process, conservative and highly unpopular renovations imposed by Napoleon III, the disrepute of the regime found its outlet: the spontaneous and popular insurrection that gave rise to the Commune.

The Parisian workers' uprising was the apex and point of inflection of a long process, aggravated and accelerated in the previous six months by successive episodes of collapse: the Sedan defeat [1 September 1870]; the capture and exposure of the emperor; the escape of the new government; and the surrender of Paris to the Prussian troops. This capitulation in turn precipitated the free fall of the imperial regime and, almost immediately thereafter, the bourgeois order *tout court*.

On 28 March 1871 a revolutionary workers' State was proclaimed, supported by the First International.¹ The bourgeoisie, fortified in Versailles, immediately reacted to the Commune with civil war.

In short, the renovation of Paris was not enough to implement the new order. In a politicised nation accustomed to revolution, much more was necessary: resistance and popular memory had to be extinguished, without this there would be no capitalist industrialisation in the country.

The Bloody Week, in which the Versailles troops annihilated the survivors of the Commune, saw 30,000 to 40,000 prisoners, including women and children, summarily executed. By then, according to official figures, 36,309 prisoners had passed through councils of war. How many was this in reality?

Contemporary historian Prosper-Olivier Lissagaray, who had Manet among his listeners, reported in his book, *Histoire de la Commune*:

The wholesale massacres lasted up to the first days of June, and the summary executions up to the middle of that month. For a long time mysterious dramas were enacted in the Bois de Boulogne. Never will the exact number of the victims of the Bloody Week be known. The chief of military justice admitted 17,000 shot; the municipal council of Paris paid the expenses of burial of 17,000 corpses; but a great number were killed out of Paris or burnt. There is no exaggeration in saying 20,000 at least.²

In addition to the reconquest of Paris and the restoration of the 'Holy Alliance' between the bourgeois, 'Ultras' (who defended the *Ancien Régime*), Bonapartists, and Prussian invaders, the episode accomplished the radical modernisation of the labour market, in accordance with the needs of capital. It

¹ The International Workingmen's Association, also called the First International, was founded in 1864 and had existed for seven years when the Commune Council was proclaimed on 28 March 1871, with support from the association, although not directly connected to it.

² Lissagaray 2007, p. 383.

required the crushing of skilled labour, as a mode of production and a political subject. It meant the final asphyxiation of the worker-craftsman as an independent social category and his objectification or metamorphosis into an abstract and faceless being, a mere supplier of physical energy.³

In the order of labour, the disappearance of the craftsman as the subject of a partly self-organised experience of labour implied the splitting of productive subjectivity into two spheres that would become irreducibly polarised: intellectual and manual labour.

In the decades after the tragic end of the Commune, which involved some major artists (Courbet, Manet, and Degas), the world of painting also witnessed the end of an era and the entry into a new historical order. Painting's pre-eminent place as a practice of excellence, as an exemplarily sophisticated result of craftsmanship, came to an end.

For some generations of very productive painters – aware of the tradition of excellence of their craft, but also of the new historical moment – the disinheritance of painting from the unique place it had occupied for over five centuries necessitated its refounding and reinvention.

The post-Manet generation was possibly the first to live with the consequences of the disjunction between intellectual and physical labour – a disjunction which gave rise to an unprecedented reflection in painting on the issue of labour, with practical developments manifested in various new pictorial processes.

In this sense, this text attempts to provide concrete historical substance for Baudelaire's simultaneously comforting and ironic statement in a letter to

3 After citing sources that mention up to 35,000 executions, George Soria presents in *Grande Histoire de la Commune* a very significant official figure to understand the impact of that historical process on the reorganisation of labour. Between the elections of February and those of 2 July 1871, the statistics recorded a decrease of 100,000 male voters in Paris. An official survey conducted later by three aldermen about the labour shortage faced by the industry and commerce of Paris, highlighted the disappearance of one-fourth of the contingent of city workers. Another significant official document, cited by Soria, indicates the many different occupations of the 'individuals imprisoned' by the Versailles government, who survived the massacre of May and June, to be judged later. The records show, alongside professions that still exist today – architects (108), lawyers (15), butchers (163), bakers (123) – many practitioners of other crafts, virtually eliminated by industrialisation and today more easily found in dictionaries than in practice: armourers (34), weighers (5), truss suppliers (3), goldbeaters (14), costume jewellery makers (528), toymakers (47), laundry workers (191), hosiers (73), button makers (39), bronze makers (67), brewers (7), brickmakers (119), hardware merchants (89), embroiderers (9), brush makers (87), polishers (16), etc. This list of occupations only includes professions beginning with 'a' and 'b' (in French). See Soria 1971, pp. 47–50.

Manet (Brussels, 11 May 1865), affirming that he would one day be proclaimed 'the first in the decrepitude of [his] art'.⁴

The hypothesis is that the form and content of this decrepitude, have to do with the overcoming of craftsmanship in favour of the new division of labour, which, in developed capitalism, is based on the irreducible separation of intellectual and manual labour.

In other words, a historical turning point occurred between Baudelaire's comment above and another that would also come to be a milestone (albeit a misunderstood one). Thus, Cézanne told Émile Bernard something like the following: 'I am too old, I have not realised, and now I will not [be able to] realise. I remain the primitive of the way I have discovered'.⁵

What did Cézanne discover? Contrary to what the naïve and psychologising understanding of his interlocutor led many to believe, his discovery concerned the transformation in the labour processes and the consequences implied therein for painting.

Too fast or too slow – in any case, always fragmented – from then on painting would no longer retain the rhythm and integrity of the metabolic union of intellectual and physical action, typical of the work of craftsmen. If the hypothesis in question is well founded, Cézanne adopted his own measures in this regard.

In short, through an analysis of some significant cases, I propose to discuss and illustrate how some relevant pictorial experiences replicated and forged distinct strategies, before the vast seismic tremor that was the traumatic reorganisation of labour by capital.

Practice as a Criterion

In the final decades of the nineteenth century, after the official advent of impressionism, sealed with the 1874 exhibition and the successive shows of that movement, different tendencies and artistic experiments developed. The

4 Manet had expressed to his friend his perplexity over the insults aimed at *Olympia* (1863) and his Caravaggesque *Christ Insulté* (1865) and wrote about it to Baudelaire. See Baudelaire 1998, p. 302.

5 See Bernard 1921, p. 614, apud Shiff 1986, note 36 on p. 295. The oddity of the translation is in the original transcription. See also Bernard 1904, p. 25, apud Shiff 1986, note 36 on p. 295; Bernard 1920, pp. 275, 278, apud Shiff 1986, note 36 on p. 295. An observation by Jean Pascal summarised the image of Cézanne as a primitive: 'Evidently Cézanne, who retains the ingenuous clumsiness [*gaucherie*] of the primitives, did not realise [*n'a pas réalisé*] his visions'. Pascal 1904, p. 11, apud Shiff 1986, note 36 on p. 295.

re-proposition of realism, after its actualisation by Manet,⁶ certainly included impressionism, as well as works from the 1870s and later by Cézanne and Van Gogh, among others.

However, the overall picture was complex and cannot be considered solely in the light of realism, just as it is not possible to regard the realist mode as a unified tendency, since other values and aesthetic trends came into play, which began to populate the avant-garde alongside realism.

The most prominent movements were symbolism, containing renewed forms of classicism, opticalist ideas – claimed by the impressionists and symbolists – and formalism in general, as an aesthetic and historiographical trend – in this case connected to Fielder's doctrine of 'pure visuality' – not to mention side references to non-European (or 'primitive') forms.

The new discourses intermingled and shaped the heterogeneous ideas of the period, disputing the genesis and control of modern artistic experience. Since that point, as with the dispute around Manet,⁷ the most advanced artistic investigations, such as those by Cézanne, Van Gogh, and the cubists, became indissociable from doctrinal and ideological clashes, giving rise to widely divergent interpretations.

Modes and Forms of Production

The ideological clashes and confrontations around art indicated the historical overcoming of the aesthetic paradigm of contemplation, as an idealised harmonisation of interests. An irreconcilable and conflictual society was matched by an art that was also conflicted and segmented into various trends.

By overcoming the contemplative paradigm, pictorial practice was given a new status from Manet onwards. The ethical and strategic value of the productive practice became a focal point vis-à-vis the finished result or final image; the issue of labour also stood out in the same manner, as a principle and decisive factor in the aesthetic sphere. This will be explored in detail here.

When the productive practices – and living labour as substance, rather than tradition or form – became decisive in the creation of value in art, examining the ways of using the paintbrush became vital for distinguishing artistic practices and movements.

6 See Clark 1989b; Clark 1987, pp. 259–273. On Manet's posthumous annexation by impressionism, see Fried 1996; on Manet's realism, see also the previous texts in this volume and Martins 2007, pp. 17–75.

7 See 'The Returns of Regicide' and 'Parisian Scenes', in this volume.

Considering the particular method of applying brushwork – concretely establishing the specific configuration of styles – helps differentiate between the works of Monet, Cézanne, and Van Gogh, which all originate from Manet's works and likewise derived from the primacy of sensation.

The Instant and the Paintbrush

Substantiating the brushstroke was a constant and general concern of the impressionists, beyond individual stylistic mark-making. Each contact of the paintbrush with the canvas, as the beginning and end of the impressionist research, was intended to correspond to the immediacy of sensation.⁸

The mark on the canvas acted as the ritual record of the relationship between the singular spontaneity of the subject and the objectified phenomenon. Despite getting lost in the multitude of similar strokes on the canvas, each touch was intended to fuse the singularity of a sensation, the peculiarity of the instant and of the elementary pictorial act; simultaneously ratifying its apparent objectivity, embodied in the supposedly simultaneous combination of four distinct factors: subjectivated instant or sensation, paintbrush, paint, and canvas.

For the impressionists, spontaneity and instantaneity escaped from the normativity of academic painting. Impressionism was a cult of the ideal of

8 'The impressionists, in their search for a means of achieving a direct, unmediated response to nature, had defined pictorial truth in terms of the ideal of naive vision. This ideal corresponded to the traditional metaphor according to which the revelation of truth was analogous to the experience of seeing. Paradoxically, such seeing could only be translated into painting by the spontaneous, gestural mark of the artist. The immediacy of the artist's *touch*, conceived as an indexical marking of an individual unique presence and response to nature, thus served as a sign for the immediacy of the artist's *vision*. By privileging vision over other senses, the impressionists also created a new form of pictorial unity. Color and line were welded into a single technique of sketch-like drawing, so that forms and contours now emerged only as the result of color relationships. As a result of the effort to render the effect of immediately perceived visual sensations, the depicted scene tended to flatten into a field of shimmering color, which denied the viewer a sense of the tactile presence of objects. Ideally, spectators of impressionist art were invited to contemplate the spectacle before them in a moment of heightened stillness, but not to imagine any form of physical interaction with the work'. See Poggi 1989, p. 137. See also, on brushstrokes as a sign of immediacy in impressionism, Shiff 1986, p. 191.

absolute immediacy as a cognitive model, linked to the instant sensation, in the confluence of subjectivity and objectivity.⁹

Accordingly, impressionism was consistent with the empiricist or nominalist psychology of Taine and Littré, which sanctioned the peculiarity of each sensation and its irreducibility to universal instances and categories. Impressionism also agreed with the positivist reduction of the canvas to two-dimensionality.

The ideal of absolute immediacy directly and frontally contrasted with industrial labour. Thus, such an attachment to the instant and to the singular impression of the brushstroke – absolutised as symbols of immediacy – was probably motivated by opposition to the massification and uniformisation of individuals, already evident in that period of modernisation.

However, how could an eminently optical and therefore still largely contemplative form of compensation reach critical or reflective effectiveness, in the face of the segmentation and specialisation of body parts, and of an analogously segmented subjectivity? How could the absolutisation of immediacy counter the consequences of the abstraction of labour?

9 The premise that a modality of previous experience, or an experience prior to the distinction between subject and object, registered in the sensation, constituted the leitmotif of several movements at the time; impressionists, symbolists, and, in the sphere of philosophy, empiricists and positivists all shared this conviction. The peculiarity of the impressionists before the symbolists resided in their 'manner'. As for the idea of sensation, the dictionary of Émile Littré mentions a definition by David Hume: 'The more or less pronounced effect that external objects make upon the sense organs'. Shiff summarises: '[f]or Littré, an external object cannot be known; only the individual's impression of it is known as real or true. In other words, one can never have absolute knowledge of the external world in the manner that one does have absolute knowledge (or experience) of an impression; one's view of the world is induced from one's experience of impressions and is necessarily relative'. According to Shiff, 'Littré's position on the significance of the impression was not an unusual one'. Thus, Théodule Ribot and Hippolyte Taine, both disseminators of English psychology in France, 'discussed the impression as the "phénomène primitif" or the "fait primitif" which depended on conditions, both internal and external, subjective and objective. Littré, Ribot, and Taine tended to equate the impression with sensation'. See Shiff 1986, pp. 18–19. On the crucial role of the 'physical' aspect of the 'immediate sensation' and the 'drastic reduction of the associations bound up with the visual act' as an aspect common to the different trends of post-Courbet French painting, see Greenberg 1984a, Greenberg 1984b, pp. 120; 157.

Impressionist Odyssey: In Search of the Lost Unity or towards the Optical Absolute

How did the impressionists intend to achieve such immediacy? Monet began as a disciple of Manet. Monet's paintings from the period before the constitution of the impressionist group, when compared with those made later, seemed more disjointed, their brushstrokes scattered and loose.¹⁰ After the constitution of the movement, Monet's brushstrokes started to suggest some form of unification.

How can we explain this change, if the individuation of brushstrokes, as well as their corresponding instants, formed a crucial part of impressionism's method? In addition to brushstrokes, the chromatic order and *facture* of Monet's paintings also varied. That is, since one relied on the concreteness of sensation and not on some *a priori* principle of unity, there was no way to reject outright some mode of fragmentation.

At first, the canvasses, still retaining Manet's influence, presented the colours as distinct elements. In contrast, unity was ensured by atmospheric factors or natural elements (smoke, light, vegetation, river surfaces, the sea, the sky, snow, etc.).¹¹ Later, unity acquired a more structural tenor and began to be determined in tonal terms.¹²

10 See, for example, the following works of Monet: *The Jetty at Le Havre in Rough Weather* (*La Jetée du Havre par Mauvais Temps*, 1867); *River Scene at Bennecourt* (*Village de Bonnières/Au Bord de l'Eau*, 1868); *La Grenouillère* (*La Grenouillère*, c. 1869); *Red Mulletts* (*Rougets*, 1869); *Regattas at Argenteuil* (*Régates à Argenteuil*, 1872); *Impression, Sunrise* (*Impression, Soleil Levant*, 1872). All these canvasses were reproduced and documented in Schapiro 1997.

11 See, for example, from Monet: *Flowering Garden at Sainte-Adresse* (*Jardin en Fleurs, à Sainte-Adresse*, c. 1866); *Garden at Sainte-Adresse* (*Jardin à Sainte-Adresse*, 1867); *Women in the Garden* (*Femmes au Jardin*, c. 1866); *The Beach at Sainte-Adresse* (*La Plage de Sainte-Adresse*, 1867); *The Magpie* (*La Pie*, 1868–1869); *Poppies/Poppy Field* (*Coquelicots*, 1873); *The Coal Dockers/The Coalmen* (*Les Charbonniers/Les Déchargeurs de Charbon*, 1875); *Arrival at Saint-Lazare Station/The Gare Saint-Lazare: Arrival of a Train* (*La Gare Saint-Lazare: Arrivée d'un Train*, 1877).

12 See, for example, from Monet: *Haystacks [Effect of Snow and Sun]* (*Meules [Effet de Neige; Soleil]*, 1891); *Grainstack, Snow Effect/Haystack, Morning Snow Effect* (*Meule, Effet de Neige, le Matin*, 1891); *Rouen Cathedral: The Portal [Sunlight]* (*La Cathédrale de Rouen: Le Portail [Soleil]*, 1894); *Rouen Cathedral, Façade* (*La Cathédrale de Rouen, Effet de Soleil*, 1894); *Rouen Cathedral Façade and Tour d'Albane [Morning Effect]* (*Cathédrale de Rouen, Façade et Tour d'Albane, Effet de Matin*, 1894); *Houses of Parliament* (*Vue de Londres, Westminster*, c. 1900–1901).

In the early 1880s, and especially during a trip to the Italian Riviera in the beginning of 1884, Monet's brushwork began to display a greater gestural impulse. But the final unity prevailed.¹³ The texture also varied – sometimes smoother, other times rougher¹⁴ – becoming almost organic. But the principle of pictorial unity remained constant over the course of these variations. Notwithstanding the pictures' original fragmentary structures, they were ultimately unified in a synthesis that was always affirmed, in one way or another.

Thus, unity came to be determined and achieved in optical terms. The manual execution of the painting, segmented and serialised with uniform touches, followed the integrating movement of opticity; the texture could vary, according to a range of expedients, but it was also dictated in optical terms. The hegemony of vision in the painting's execution led to an optically performed supra-gestural synthesis. This integration and homogenisation of different areas gave the final appearance of the product an increasingly organic physiognomy, which reflected the idea of nature as a system, underlying the origins of painting.

Mirages

Opticity, organicity and totality were all facets of this circular process. Monet's pantheism, highlighted by Geffroy,¹⁵ was expressed in a productive logic, which turned his canvasses into doubles of nature. Every sensation varied and

13 See, for example, from Monet: *Bouquet of Sunflowers* (*Bouquet de Soleils*, 1881); *The Valley of the Nervia*, (*Vallée de la Nervia*, 1884); *Palm Trees at Bordighera* (*Palmiers à Bordighera*, 1884); *Bordighera* (1884).

14 See, for example, from Monet: *Grainstack, Snow Effect/ Haystack, Morning Snow Effect* (*Meule, Effet de Neige, le Matin*, 1891); *Rouen Cathedral Façade and Tour d'Albane* [*Morning Effect*] (*Cathédrale de Rouen, Façade et Tour d'Albane, Effet de Matin*, 1894).

15 For Monet's pantheistic and symbolist elements, highlighted by Francastel in light of an observation by Gustave Geffroy, see Francastel 1937, pp. 58–59, 182–220, esp. p. 191; see also Geffroy 1892–1903, and Geffroy 1924, apud Shiff 1986, p. 8, note 33 on p. 235. Shiff notes, when summarising and quoting from a text by Geffroy introducing the exhibition of the *Meules* series (1891): 'like an impressionist, Monet "gives the sensation of the ephemeral instant" and is the "anxious observer of minutes." ... Geffroy concluded, "instinctive and delicately expressive [*instinctif et nuancé*] – and he is a great pantheistic poet"'. See Geffroy 1892, pp. 26–29, apud Shiff 1986, pp. 11, note 38 on p. 236. For similarities between impressionists and symbolists, see below.

achieved an irreducible singularity, translated into the singularity of each recorded stroke; however, all of them finally found a place, without clashing with the pictorial whole.¹⁶

The canvasses made in the late nineteenth century are exemplary in this respect, and those made after 1900, even more so. They appear to be largely organised around thematic kernels: the Giverny garden, London fog, the vistas of Venice and, par excellence, the *Water Lilies* (*Nymphéas*).

In contrast to the reiteration of those thematic kernels, spontaneity and instantaneity were intensified and the weight of subjectivity increased until they became practically absolute, while the thematic connection underwent a gradual process of abstraction. Analogously, the objective aspects of language dissolved.

Thus, the horizontal and vertical divisions of the canvas, like the horizon or stems crossing the canvas from top to bottom in the *Poplars* (*Peupliers*) series,¹⁷ painted around 1890–1891, tended to disperse and disappear, engulfed by the force of gesture. Through its exclusive reduction to subjectivity, the pictorial process was purified.

In this case, even if no longer figurative or visible, unity was reached inefably, disseminated in myriad tones and instants, like an emanation of infinity or negation of all limits or resistance. This was pointed out by historian Leo Steinberg in a comment on the limitlessness of the *Water Lilies* (*Nymphéas*):

You can invert the picture or yourself at will, climb upwards with slow, sinking clouds or drift with lily leaves across a nether sky; lie cheek to cheek with the horizon, search among opaque waters for diaphanous shrubs, and find the source of light at its last destination ... in the *Water Lilies*, the law of gravity – that splendid projection of the human mind too firmly lodged in its body – is abrogated, as in the underwater movies

16 Strictly speaking, this is not always true, as shown by the canvasses posthumously exhibited, for example, in the recent show *Monet in the 20th Century* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 20 Sep.–27 Dec. 1998; Royal Academy of Arts, London, 23 Jan.–18 April 1999). However, since Monet did not show, in his lifetime, his aggressively discordant canvasses, not even as preparatory works, this demonstrates his refusal or uncertainty about conceiving of painting in these terms.

17 See, for example, from Monet: *The Poplars/The Four Trees* (*Peupliers des Bords de l'Epte: Les 4 Arbres*, 1891); *Poplars on the Banks of the River Epte* (*Les Peupliers au bord de l'Epte*, 1891); *Poplars on the Banks of the River Epte/Poplars on the Epte* (*Les Peupliers au Bord de l'Epte*, 1890–1891).

of [Jacques] Cousteau. ... The whole world is cut loose from anthropomorphic or conceptual points of reference.¹⁸

The negation of finitude and the limits associated with it constituted one of the watersheds between impressionism and Manet. It is true that the *Water Lilies* (*Nymphéas*) were only made decades after Manet's death. But the aspects maximised in them were already implicitly or virtually present in the impressionist choice of atmospheric elements, as opposed to the resistance of things. In this sense, by regarding Monet as an exponent of impressionism¹⁹ and the absolutisation of the immediacy of sensation as a touchstone of impressionism, the *Water Lilies* may be regarded as a significant development of the original assumptions.

In short, impressionist practice, derived from empiricism – namely, that the idea that sensation in its immediacy signalled the existence of a unity prior to the split between subject and object – created a way of painting aimed at the dissolution of all limits, resistance, or otherness. This was paralleled with the expectation of reunifying subject and object through aesthetic practice.

In Monet's works, ratification of the classical principle of pictorial unity corroborated – on the specific plane of the work as an object for aesthetic contemplation – the belief in the unity of the system in which subject and object supposedly participated. At one and the same time, this belief signalled the regressive, compensatory, and restorative ideological and aesthetic tenor of impressionism. It also sanctioned its entronement as an emblematic style of the *Belle Époque* and a cornerstone of growing collections in the emerging North American economy.²⁰

18 See Steinberg 1956, pp. 46–48, apud Leja 1998, p. 108. Many of the sentences of this text were restated by the author, with few alterations, in Steinberg 1975b, pp. 235–239. Steinberg also points out the pioneering role of the *Water Lilies* (*Nymphéas*) when compared with works such as Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed* (1955), which generate, according to Steinberg, a new pictorial space. Steinberg calls this 'flatbed', since it is predominantly horizontal, unlike the Renaissance pictures (the term, according to Steinberg, comes from the horizontal plates situated at the base of the flatbed press, for graphic printing). See Steinberg 1975c, p. 85. In fact, before Steinberg, in 1948 Greenberg had already stressed Monet's pioneering role in the construction of 'all-over, decentralised polyphonic painting'. See Greenberg 1984b, p. 155. For an opposed interpretation of Monet's legacy to North American painting, see Leja 1998, pp. 98–108.

19 See Schapiro 1997, pp. 179–205.

20 See Tucker 1983, pp. 21–41; see also Tucker 1982, and Tucker, Shackelford and Stevens 1998; see also Leja 1998, pp. 98–108, pp. 291–293 (notes).

Swimming with and against the Tide

In his time, Manet acted as a sort of champion and point of reference for young impressionist painters, but this does not mean that he participated in the movement. Although recognised by the young artists, Manet was slow to achieve public acceptance. His work was characterised as provocative, and still encountered hostility even after the widespread appreciation of the impressionists.²¹ Monet repaid the support he had received from Manet in his early career by leading a campaign, after Manet's death, for *Olympia* to be included in the official collection of the Louvre.

Affinities and circumstances led the two artists to work side by side. In some of his canvasses, Manet would paint the younger colleague at work outdoors, or he would portray his family. If Manet captured and studied Monet's activity, turning it into a theme, from the point of view of the impressionist painter, such an interest was not reciprocal. Their apparently shared affections and activities did not translate into similar pictorial conceptions. It is well known that in life Manet never accepted the invitation to participate in an impressionist exhibition. In other words, he did not want his paintings mistaken for those of the impressionists. What do such discrete discrepancies reveal?

From an aesthetic point of view, if Manet's anti-normative and spontaneist position, privileging sensation, served as a platform for the emergence of the impressionists – who, like Manet, were desirous of authenticity and originality, at the margins of academic standards – there was nevertheless a major divergence between his values and procedures and those of the younger artists.

Manet refused every presupposition of infinity or dissolution of the limits of things. What is more, he did not embrace the classical dogma of pictorial unity. Among Manet's works that best demonstrate this materialist and realist stance, there are some, which, over the course of their execution, display some circumstantial relationship with Monet. However, while with Monet one sees a growing tendency towards the chromatic dissolution of forms, in Manet, even in works with themes that resonate with impressionism, he powerfully emphasised the masts, crossing, either from a chromatic point of view or from vertical lines, the sky and the unity of the canvas.²² Moreover, in *Claude Monet Paint-*

²¹ See Fried 1996, pp. 3–6.

²² See, for example, from Manet: *The Banks of the Seine at Argenteuil* (*La Seine à Argenteuil*, 1874); *The Monet Family in their Garden at Argenteuil* (*La Famille Monet au Jardin*, 1874); *Claude Monet Painting in his Studio Boat* (*Claude Monet Peignant dans son Atelier/ Monet Sur Son Bateau* [*Die Barke*] 1874). For other contrasts between the two painters, see also, from Manet: *Madame Manet on a Blue Sofa/ Mrs. Edouard Manet on a Blue Sofa* (*Portrait de*

ing in his *Studio Boat* (*Claude Monet Peignant dans son Atelier/Monet Sur Son Bateau* [Die Barke] 1874), in an almost emblematic way, as if he were refuting Monet, Manet highlighted silhouettes of factory chimneys in the background. At least two of these chimneys appear to emit powerful gusts of soot, represented by Manet with a dirty yellow, which stands out – and absolutely does not dissolve – amid the blue sky.

These works by Manet were set apart from impressionism for very clear reasons: 1) prioritising the study of situations or human types – rather than landscapes that were characterised in a secondary way and as denaturalised objects; 2) close-up and short field of view, according to the tradition of realism; 3) rejection of tonality, as well as any other form of chromatic or atmospheric unification; 4) emphatic use of repeated or almost serialised brushstrokes, as a way to determine each body.

The Coming and Going of Paintbrushes

It is not pertinent to discuss here the three characteristics inherited by Manet, largely from the previous realist movement. But, in regard to the fourth reason setting Manet apart from impressionism, beyond the turbulence he sought to manifest vis-à-vis the sensation of the ephemeral, Manet's brushwork over the course of his oeuvre also came to denote, like the rhythm of a moving oar, some sense of tempo or order. Thus, at times it even implied a methodical aspect, that is, a move towards the regime of serial brushstrokes, which Cézanne would adopt.

One of the first manifestations in this direction was an etching Manet made in 1871 during the siege of Paris, *Queue at the Butcher Shop/ Line in Front of the Butcher Shop* (*La Queue Devant la Boucheries*, 1870–1871). In this work, the contrast between the uniform lines of the contours of each body, strongly divergent between one physical mass and another, evoked the dramatic and growing tension in the besieged city, ravaged by famine after three months of siege by the Prussian troops. In this case, as well as carrying narrative meaning, the procedure already assumed the fundamental role of structuring the composition.

The double semantic or narrative and structural role of lines and brushstrokes would become more pronounced in the following years. From a seman-

Madame Édouard Manet sur un Canapé Bleu, 1874); *In the Boat* (*En Bateau*, 1874); *Argenteuil* (1874); *The Grand Canal, Venice* (*Le Grand Canal à Venise*, 1875).

tic point of view, the use of brushstrokes as a way to determine volumes, rather than the traditional devices (tone gradation, chiaroscuro, or perspective effects), was achieved through the marked contrast between the direction of the brushstrokes for every specific body and those of neighbouring ones. Divergence between the vectors of the brushstrokes, suggesting diagrammatic representations of lines of force, alluded to resistance and friction – in short, to the play of reciprocal actions and reactions characteristic of the interactions between material things. Therefore, through lines and brushmarks, these physical determinations demarcated the differences between various bodies as repulsions between masses or energies.

The Lesson of Resistance

From a structural point of view, using lines or brushstrokes to define mass within the limits of each body introduced a discontinuity into the composition. This discontinuity marks the specific boundaries between one body and another. Manet's fragmentation, whose meaning was materialistic, also diverged from the character of the impressionist poetics as a metaphor or allegorical vehicle of Monet's monistic and pantheistic belief. Besides, the discontinuity, which introduced the revelation of the picture's making, highlighted the opaque and material content of the language and suspended all belief in the immediacy of the aesthetic sensation in both painter and observer.

In other words, the structural function of discontinuity in the brushstrokes, also alluded to the immanent awareness of the subject, not only in painting, but also in the representation of the phenomenon as reality. Cézanne, Van Gogh, Degas, and the pre-cubist Picasso would later follow and develop this critical lesson.

Manet's adoption of these distinctive procedures in the use of oil paint seems to become progressively more accentuated after the constitution of the impressionist movement. Was this a way of drawing a line between Manet's realism – materialist, discontinuous and critical – and the other form of realism – monist, idealist, and ultimately naïve – of impressionist origin?

The fact is that in addition to the examples mentioned that were contemporary to the emergence of impressionism – (from Manet) *The Banks of the Seine at Argenteuil* (*La Seine à Argenteuil*, 1874); *Claude Monet Painting in his Studio Boat* (*Claude Monet Peignant dans son Atelier*, 1874); *The Monet Family in their Garden at Argenteuil* (*La Famille Monet au Jardin*, 1874); *In the Boat* (*En Bateau*, 1874); *Argenteuil* (1874) – one can distinguish in later works an industrious momentum and greater productive impetus, or a reflectivity intensified in the

brushstrokes. This is evident in several of Manet's canvasses: *The Grand Canal, Venice* (*Le Grand Canal à Venise*, 1875); *Road-menders in the Rue Mosnier* (*La Rue Mosnier aux Pavés*, 1878); *The Walk* (*Promenade: Portrait de Madame Gamby dans le Jardin de l'Artiste à Bellevue*, c. 1879); *George Moore at the Café* (*Portrait de Moore*, 1879); *Woman with a Cat/Portrait of Mme. Manet* (*La Femme au Chat*, c. 1880).²³

Cézanne, between Two Realisms

Before becoming involved with the impressionists and their *plein-air* practice, Cézanne's work was slowly decanted over the 1860s, under the impact of romanticism and realism. One could already note some inspiration from Manet, by then a landmark reference for the young painters, particularly in the violent chromatic contrasts of his early paintings and in other aspects. But the pictorial character of the young Cézanne – the summary modelling, the dramatic theatricality and feeling, etc., entirely out of keeping with the frivolity of the *Belle Époque* – could also be attributed to the work of Daumier. Given its degree of introversion, this period of Cézanne's work was hastily, or scholastically, called romantic.²⁴

Cézanne's transition to another pictorial regime, guided in principle by extroversion and mainly mediated by Pissarro, took place in close dialogue with impressionism. Thus, in 1872, the young Cézanne began to paint outdoors in Pissarro's company, who initiated his younger companion in the programme

23 See Cachin 1991, pp. 56–57, 100–101, 112–121.

24 See, for example, Cézanne's works: *Bread and Eggs* (*Le Pain et les Oeufs*, 1865); *Portrait of Louis-Auguste Cézanne Reading 'L'Événement'* (*Louis-Auguste Cézanne, Père de l'Artiste, Lisant 'L'Événement'*, 1866); *Skull and Candlestick* (*Crâne et Chandelier*, 1866); *Uncle Dominique as a Lawyer* (*L'Avocat/ l'Oncle Dominique*, 1866); *Uncle Dominique/ Man in a Cotton Cap* (*L'Homme à la Blouse Blanche / L'Homme à la Blouse Blanche/ L'Homme au Bonnet de Coton [L'Oncle Dominique]*, 1866); *Paul Alexis Reading to Émile Zola* (*Paul Alexis Lisant à Émile Zola [Paul Alexis Lendo para Émile Zola]*, 1869–1870); *Young Girl at the Piano – Overture to Tannhäuser* (*Jeune Fille au Piano – Overture de Tannhäuser*, c. 1869); *Still Life with Green Pot and Pewter Jug* (*Pot Vert et Bouilloire d'Étain/ Nature Morte à la Bouilloire*, c. 1869–1870); *The Black Clock*, (*Nature Morte à la Pendule Noire*, c. 1870). All these works were documented in Cachin and Watkins 1996. For traces of Manet's influence on Cézanne, including the point of view of the themes, see the entry by Henri Loyrette on *Still Life with Green Pot and Pewter Jug* (*Pot Vert et Bouilloire d'Étain/ Nature Morte à la Bouilloire*, c. 1869–1870), in Cachin and Watkins 1996, pp. 113–114. For an opposing view, see Loran 1985, p. 95.

of the burgeoning movement. In Cézanne's canvasses, the sentimental point of view and the strong dramatic impregnation inherited from the romanticism of the previous generation and from Daumier's fondness of theatre, as well as the chromatic contrasts of his previous paintings, gave way to the thematic blandness and bucolic mark of impressionism. One also notes the predominantly light and cold palette, typical of the latter movement, which took light as one of its first motivations.

Thus, the fulcrum of Cézanne's painting – the concreteness of sensation, which had become almost a modern commonplace since Delacroix and Baudelaire – apparently appears the same as that of the impressionists and symbolists. His new general goals, namely, the subjective truth of spontaneity, and the qualities of authenticity and originality of anti-academic art and the depiction of the instant, as captured in sensation, were also those of the impressionist group, as well as the symbolists.²⁵

However, contrary to the illusory unity of things favoured by the impressionists, Cézanne's practice, viewed by many as a *gaucherie* or clumsiness, produced a visible detachment from the subject.

In effect, the marked duality between the two early moments of Cézanne's production is merely apparent and does not explain his transition from introversion to extroversion. On the other hand, the authenticity and originality that would come to be characteristic of Cézanne's mature work, in a subjectivist shift from the main axis of impressionism, cannot be thought of as independent from it.

25 For a detailed list of the points in common between impressionists and symbolists, both founded on the subjective figure of the 'truth' of sensation, derived from a shared root in romantic idealism, see Shiff 1986, pp. 4–20. Standing against a vision widespread *a posteriori* (a notable exception is Francastel, see below) in the course of the twentieth century, highlighting impressionism's concern with 'a more "accurate" and "objective" representation of nature', Shiff argues that 'the accumulation of documentary evidence ... indicate[s] that *symbolism and impressionism, as understood around 1890, were not antithetical*, especially if the term "impressionism" is to signify the art of Monet, Renoir, Pissarro, and those closely related to them'. See Shiff 1986, pp. 13 and 7. At the time, when both movements were aligned against academic art, it was not easy to distinguish between impressionists and symbolists. Thus, '[i]n 1892, Maurice Denis could not decide whether Renoir's art should be considered "idéaliste" or "naturaliste"'. See Shiff 1986, p. 8. However, it should be noted that if Manet's pictorial work was also seen as originating from sensation, an important distinction was made by Fernand Caussy, in the article 'Psychologie de l'impressionnisme' (1904). According to Shiff, Caussy 'identified impressionism as an art of rendering the first impression but made a basic distinction[:] ... Manet's rendering of the impression was objective, while Monet's was subjective'. See Shiff 1986, pp. 19–20.

Synthesis and Sphinx

After all, what was Cézanne's synthesis, both personal and yet enigmatic, which seemed equivocal or even a failure to many? Where did the sphinx-like peculiarity of Cézanne's work reside? Where did it take root?

Let us begin by mapping out the problem of an entire generation. In general, given the impressionist subsumption of most pictorial structures to empirical sensation, represented by atmospheric 'coordinates' (light-air), form – as part of the suprasensible domain of mental categories – lost all metaphysical validity.

The same happened with the foundation of the pictorial plane, that is, the synthetic form of the infinite in the finite, typified by Alberti's famous 'translucent glass' [*vetro tralucente*],²⁶ once conceived as the visual systematisation of the world. In correlation with the dissolution of form in aerial perspective, the plane without metaphysics was now valid as a mere two-dimensional object, practically a literal double of the canvas or painting. According to Duchamp's ironic dictum it was a merely optical or 'retinal' fact.

For Cézanne, despite overcoming the point of view of feeling which dominated his initial works, the phenomenal world was more than it appeared to be, and the subject was more than a mere vehicle for vision.

Consequently, the Cézannian aesthetic problem was laid out in other terms and required the synthetic constitution of another point of view, situated beyond the dichotomy between the solipsist primacy of feeling or of the 'romantic self' on the one hand, and the impressionist subsumption of the phenomenon to atmospheric variables on the other.

In short, in addition to the empirical understanding of space and time as mere external factors, Cézanne brought the dialectical question of the subject back into the sphere of impressionism, which the impressionists had summarily discarded from Manet's work. In other words, in reading Manet's pictorial work exclusively via the absolutisation of the instant and of sensation, the impressionists ignored the crucial interrelationship between the ephemeral and circumstantial aspects with *a priori* factors represented by memory and historical consciousness.

26 '[Painters] should know that they circumscribe the plane with their lines. When they fill the circumscribed places with colours, they should only seek to present the forms of things seen on this plane as if it were of transparent glass [*vetro tralucente*]. Thus the visual pyramid could pass through it, placed at a definite distance'. See Alberti 1966 (1, 2), p. 51.

Without abandoning the immanent and positivist assumption²⁷ of basing himself on the fundamental principles of the phenomenon given by sensation – but shirking the positivist impasse of reducing himself to that position – Cézanne recovered a semantic ambition related to the realist tradition that predated the positivist realism of impressionism. In this way Cézanne rejected the impressionists' preference for aerial perspective and returned to the semantic question of the representation of volumes,²⁸ as well as the general problem of meaning in painting, beyond strict opticality.

In short, Cézanne sought to revalidate form as signification, through authenticity and instantaneity, in order to be able to resume the potential role of the perceptual-cognitive synthesis and narrative to painting. Therefore, it was necessary to reorganise the relations between consciousness and perception, in order to re-establish the mediating role of painting in the situated subject – that is, in the synthetically reconceived immanent subject.

Manet's Lessons

Broadly speaking, this project is the one outlined by Manet, the exception being Cézanne's rejection of modern life subjects. For instance, Manet's influence can be seen in Cézanne's use of summary modelling, which aspired to *actualise* rather than dissolve the value of form.

But more important than this summary modelling – which through Cézanne's slower and more meditative method will eventually give way to an integral redefinition of modelling – was the concern with the revalidation of the truth of form. This was achieved through the affirmation of its originality and authenticity.

27 The theme of the relation between positivism and impressionism is old, but has rarely been treated with due care and thoroughness. For a careful and in many ways new approach, see Chapters 2 ('Defining "Impressionism" and the "Impression"') and 3 ('Impressionism, Truth and Positivism') in Shiff 1986, pp. 14–26; see also p. 3. Given the idealising and academic position of Comte in relation to art, Shiff notes that the impressionist artists, though 'influenced by Comtean positivism', were actually closer to the psychology of Littré and Taine, at least in terms of their individualism and belief in psychophysiology. Both Littré and Taine were positivists, but 'both of [them], in these matters, were independent of Comte, [and drew] primarily upon British sources' – i.e. empiricism. Shiff 1986, pp. 23–25. See Charlton 1959, pp. 4–5; Comte 1848; see also Littré 1852; Taine 1893, vol. 2, p. 258 and *passim*, apud Shiff 1986, notes 15 and 16 on pp. 240–241. On the positivist aspect of impressionism, see also Argan 1955, p. 32.

28 On Cézanne's rejection of aerial perspective, see Brion-Guerry 1966, p. 107.

Manet also transmitted to Cézanne two other structural ingredients: first, a concern with the systematic study of the history of painting, which impressionism had relegated in favour of a more spontaneous and immediate attitude; and second, the construction of a pictorial order based on the juxtaposition of discontinuous elements, that is, the elaboration of paintings based on what could be called the constructive principle of montage *avant la lettre*,²⁹ which organised discontinuities. This ran contrary to the impressionist concern with decorative unity.

We need not explore all the characteristics of Cézanne's oeuvre. It is crucial, however, to follow the ramifications of the new principles introduced by Manet, particularly in relation to the artistic work process and to what extent this affected Cézanne's own method. In this regard, one should examine the principle of structural discontinuity³⁰ and the correlative way of applying brushstrokes, which set Cézanne apart from the core concerns of impressionism.

Paintbrush and Method

If Cézanne followed the impressionist programme regarding the change of palette and the choice of new themes, over the course of the second half of the 1870s, he conceived, in dialectical opposition to that pictorial movement, a new practice that would have a more methodical and reflective appearance.

In fact, by revealing the self-organisation of the painter's work in the course of the process itself, this way of painting combined production and reflection. It was nurtured in close dialogue with the industrious nature of Manet's brushwork, possibly against the backdrop of public affirmation around impressionist spontaneism.

Thus, in a disciplined manner, Cézanne pulverised the unity of the scene into numerous fragments or atomised planes, through brushstrokes organised in regular series, yet simultaneously articulated in different directions.³¹ This

29 For the active utilisation of discontinuity or relations of montage in the work of Cézanne, see 'Parisian Scenes', in this volume.

30 See, in this regard, the notions of 'lost edge' and 'negative space', set as the principles of pictorial organisation of Cézanne's works, according to E. Loran. See Loran 1985, pp. 102–103, 132–133.

31 *Rocks at l'Estaque* (*Rochers à l'Estaque* [*Rochedos de l'Estaque*], 1879–1882) is a good example of Cézanne's brushwork as method. The method was conceived in the late 1870s and developed in the following years. For previous examples in the same vein, see

ingenious demolition resulted in the evidence of a concrete space. This was a space mediated by a consciousness based on an immanent principle, that is, concretely linked to the specific situation of the observer. Instead of employing a geometrical manner of representing depth, according to the frontal view of Renaissance perspective, one finds a concrete or phenomenised space-time arising from the dialectical relationship between the observer and his or her theme.

Meditations

What did Cézanne seek by negating the geometric paradigm or ideal of pictorial space? What did he hope to gain by aiming at the constitution of a new mode of representation, restructuring the relationship between space and volume, discarding the rules of proportion, and dissolving the premise of discursive transparency? In other words, what did Cézanne intend by discarding the principle of proportion in the representation of nature, introducing in its place serialised and opaque brushstrokes, as well as disproportion and discontinuity in the composition?

So, what precisely was the foundation of the Cézannian synthesis? How did his work combine such heterogeneous elements from the pictorial tradition? These features included, on the one hand, 'stereometry' and perspective, outlined by the anti-canonical tradition of realism,³² and, on the other, classicism, implied in the references to 'museum painting' and in imaginary themes like the bathers.

To answer these questions, however dull the enumeration of dead ideas may be, we must push through the thick residues of scholarly clichés and misconceptions that have encrusted Cézanne's work.

Classic and Primitive, the Janus God of Formalism

A considerable historiographical tradition, forged by formalist and symbolist interpretations of Cézanne's work, situated him as a classic who dealt with

Apples/Still-life with Apples (Pommes, c. 1877–1878), Five Bathers (Cinq Baigneuses, 1877–1878), etc.

32 The anti-canonical approach nurtured by realism's tradition explained the experiments with language and the shortening of perspective in still-lives and landscapes, stripped of all infinity.

the discovery of the eternal laws of nature, as opposed to the notoriously phenomenal root of impressionism.

In effect, the phenomenalisation of vision, in the wake of the primacy of feeling proposed by Baudelaire, contradicted the formalist aspiration to clear, unitary and immediate vision, as it presented itself from the late nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth century. The core of the 'classicising' position of Fiedler and Hildebrand, which remained at the centre of formalist concerns in the following decades, boiled down to the claim that aesthetic contemplation should be processed in timeless terms, unlike the successive mode of apprehension of phenomena in space and time.³³

Thus, in addition to the many common ties between the anti-academic forces that stood out on the French scene in the late nineteenth century, the movement that best met formalism's classicising purposes was symbolism. The latter was inherently idealising and neo-Platonic and prone to idealise, certainly more so than impressionism, which favoured an empiricist view.³⁴

Two eminent symbolists – first Émile Bernard and later Maurice Denis – were responsible for cementing the paradigmatic tenor of Cézanne's pictorial

33 According to Salvini, 'The more a work of art is simultaneously perceptible to the eye, the more complete is the elimination of the temporal factor from contemplation, and the more it is absolute and sublime' (Salvini ed. 1977, p. 47).

34 As discrete as the ties between empiricism and Neoplatonism are in modernity, they go back to the origin of the first, attributed to English Franciscan friar Roger Bacon (1214–1294). He was not only active in an order aligned with Augustinian Neoplatonism, but also a disciple of Robert Grosseteste (1175–1253) or Robert Greathead, bishop of Lincoln and Chancellor of Oxford University. The bishop, an eminent Neoplatonic scholar, conducted theoretical research on the identity between light, as the first corporeal form, and corporeality in general. To search for truth, according to Grosseteste and summarised by French historian Pierre Duhem, one needed an 'intellectual intuition that makes us see them [the truths] in their essence'. See Duhem 1958, v, pp. 341–342. This intuition, extracted from Neoplatonism, was precisely the opposite of the form of understanding advocated by Aristotle, distinguishing the sensible from the suprasensible, which consequently led Bacon to affirm: 'Monsignor Robert, formerly Bishop of Lincoln, of blessed memory, completely abandoned the books of Aristotle and the methods they trace; ... and he has written on issues mentioned in Aristotle's books things one hundred thousand times better than what we can grasp in bad translations of this philosopher'. See Bacon 1859, p. 469, apud Duhem 1958, III, p. 277. For the Neoplatonic character of Grosseteste's thinking, see Duhem 1958, v, pp. 341–342. For Grosseteste's speculations establishing the resemblance of light, among all 'things corporeal ... [with] these forms immutable and separate that are the intelligences', see *Lincolnensis* 1514, p. 54, apud Duhem 1958, pp. 356–358.

work, claiming it for the field of symbolism. Thence was born a genealogy of interpretations that would link the work of British art historian Roger Fry and the oft-cited study *Cézanne's Composition* by the painter Erle Loran, who reaffirmed Cézanne's classicism. Thus, a second origin – now constructed in a more consistent and reflexive way – was established for modern art. If Manet was heralded, even by Fry himself, as the original landmark and the one who had paved the way for modernism, Cézanne came to be seen as the cornerstone of a new pictorial system, according to the formalists.

But if the implications of this designation involved seeing Cézanne's oeuvre as paradigmatic and classic, then at the same time the effects of such nomination also positions his work as insufficient and incomplete.

Cézanne and his work became a sort of banner or campaign prize to be captured and used in the symbolist cause, committed to overcoming the limits of impressionism. A series of attempts were made to this end.

One such attempt came from the symbolist Émile Bernard. Besides being a painter Bernard was also a writer with a penchant for mysticism, and in articles published in *Mercure de France* (1895), he linked 'religious mysticism to a rational and organised method of painting', aiming at the 'creation of visible harmony, corresponding to the divine order of God's creation'.³⁵

Years later, Bernard would come to apply such ideas to Cézanne, whose work he held up as a model for transcending impressionism and 'discovering the universal laws of nature'. The discovery of these universal 'laws ... could be used to make a "decorative"³⁶ art of abstraction'.

Bernard took every one of Cézanne's affirmations of the laws of nature to be referring to divine laws. This misconception was neither specific nor contingent; it was reproduced in other areas, because it reflected the presuppositions of the commentator. While in his private letters, Bernard set restrictions on the conceptions of the 'master';³⁷ on a different plane he meticulously considered and filtered the painter's declarations to him. Bernard attributed Cézanne's ideas to the contradictory sides of his personality, which, according to the sym-

35 See Bernard 1895a and 1895b, apud Shiff 1986, note 9 on p. 126.

36 Emphasis added. The term 'decorative' was used alongside 'idealist', 'symbolist', 'synthetic' and 'subjective' by French symbolist critics, seeking to differentiate some artists from either realism or naturalism, or from the conventional idealism practised by the academics. See Shiff 1986, p. 7.

37 Bernard judged Cézanne to have had 'some surprisingly mundane notions about art: "Cezanne speaks only of painting nature according to his personality and not according to (the idea of) art itself. ... He professes the theories of naturalism and impressionism"'. See Bernard, letter of 5 February 1904, in Bernard 1954, p. 4, apud Shiff 1986, p. 125.

bolist, possibly combined traces of the ‘savant’ and of the ‘naïf’, endowed with an ‘instinctive feeling for these universal harmonies’.³⁸

The issue involved convergences and disagreements in the exchange of ideas between Cézanne and Bernard. However, this mismatch was neither accidental nor idiosyncratic; rather, it dated back to the existing contradictions between the impressionists and symbolists.³⁹

For Shiff, ‘[o]ne of the ways in which impressionism and symbolism may be distinguished is to associate the former with an emphasis on “nature” and the latter with a predilection for the “classical”’.⁴⁰ The symbolist movement claimed to be openly Neoplatonic. Symbolist critics and writers such as Albert Aurier and Maurice Denis would also undertake similar interpretive operations, all allegedly Neoplatonic, with respect to Van Gogh and Gauguin.⁴¹

The apple of discord between impressionists and symbolists consisted of a different theoretical understanding of the common operative principle of sensation. The impressionists, closer to positivism and empiricism, regarded sensation as a mere subjective fact; while the symbolists understood sensation

38 See Shiff 1986, p. 129. Bernard also combined the artistic qualities of the ‘naïf’ and the ‘savant’, respectively, with the ‘natural’ and the ‘classical’. See Shiff 1986, p. 128. For more details on these contrasts, see the following pages.

39 Shiff documented countless disagreements between Bernard and Cézanne, among them one related to Cézanne’s famous sentence on the importance of learning how to model nature according to the cone, the sphere and the cylinder. According to Shiff, Cézanne, who was averse to theories, was referring to ‘a device of studio practice, a manner of conceiving conventional modeling’, while Bernard viewed it as ‘an absolute law of nature or a mathematical truth’. Thus, Bernard, as a mystic, immersed in the broth of Neoplatonic culture, understood things according to this tradition, that is, as if Cézanne had made a statement about the geometrisation of space or mathematisation of the universe, as postulated in the sixteenth century, according to the Neoplatonism of the time. See Shiff 1986, p. 129.

40 See Shiff 1986, p. 130.

41 According to Shiff, it was the poet Jean Moréas who, in an article from August 1885, introduced the term ‘symbolist’ to designate a new literary school; Mallarmé, Verlaine and Moréas himself would take part in it. ‘About a year later, Moréas published his symbolist manifesto, stressing that the new poetry would evoke immaterial “Ideas” by means of a departure from (or distortion of) the “objective” view of the naturalists’. From this circle emerged two critics, Félix Fénéon and Albert Aurier, who focused on new painters in an attempt to offer alternatives to impressionism. Fénéon did just that through Seurat, in the article ‘Le Néo-Impressionisme’ (Fénéon 1887). Aurier, in turn, innovatively approaching the pictorial work of Van Gogh and Gauguin, ‘developed in 1891 a basic definition of “symbolism in painting”’. See Shiff 1986, p. 5. On the self-proclaimed Neoplatonic stance of the symbolists, see Shiff 1986, pp. 7, 41.

as an 'idea perceived by the subject' and as a springboard to the 'expression of "ideas" rather than the representation of objects'.

According to the symbolist Aurier in an essay about Gauguin, the path to be taken involved the conversion of the operations of artists, simplified and translated in terms of line and colour into 'signs ... the letters of an immense alphabet with which the man of genius alone can spell'.⁴² According to Neoplatonism, the aim was to reach 'a universal and eternal truth that might be known through the contemplation of its sign or symbol'.⁴³ In this sense, symbolist writer and theorist Rémy de Gourmont argued that 'the proper goal of the artist was to discover a "relative absolute", an ideal that conveyed the "eternal in the personal": "as personal as symbolist art may be, it should ... reach the nonpersonal"'.⁴⁴

According to the distinction made by the theory of 'pure viscosity' between the purely visual or 'decorative' dimension of painting and the narrative or 'illustrative' one (regarded as secondary),⁴⁵ a critical text by Maurice Denis about an exhibition of symbolist paintings in 1895 distinguished the visual sensation generated through pure pictorial means, that is, line, colour, etc., from the one impurely provoked, that is, through 'literary' themes. Thus, Denis insisted:

That which they [symbolist painters] expressed was surely their ideal, their vision of life, their emotion in the face of things, but they expressed it only through pictorial means ... This was their virtue: they transposed their sensations into Beauty.⁴⁶

42 See Aurier 1893a, pp. 211–213, apud Shiff 1986, p. 7.

43 See Shiff 1986, p. 7.

44 See Gourmont 1892, pp. 323–325, apud Shiff 1986, p. 41.

45 The distinction between the 'decorative' and 'illustrative' functions of painting was established by Bernard Berenson in 'The Tactile Values' (1896) and 'Decoration and Illustration' (1897). In the second text, Berenson affirmed: 'Illustration is everything which in a work of art appeals to us, not for any intrinsic quality, as of colour or form or composition, contained in the work of art itself, but for the value the thing represented has elsewhere, whether in the world outside or in the mind within. If a work of art has no intrinsic value whatever, or if we fail to perceive it, for us it is nothing but an Illustration'. If the illustration is thus defined as an indirect articulation of the aesthetic experience, by contrast, 'decorative [elements]' are all those which 'appeal directly to the senses ... or directly stimulate ideated sensations'. See Salvini 1977, pp. 38, 239.

46 See Denis 1912d, apud Shiff 1986, p. 41.

Similarly, a series of interpretations of Cézanne over the subsequent years evinced a particular strategy. This campaign was guided by the symbolist principle of direct connection or coincidence between the following three elements: 1) personal sensation; 2) pure visual sensation, directly linked to pure pictorial elements (line, colour, etc.); and 3) Beauty and/or the Idea, as symbols of the unity of all things.

Given the fundamental importance of the principle of unity for Neoplatonism, the operation of 'classicising', eternalising or unifying became decisive for Neoplatonic symbolist critics. This meant purifying the works in question of all concreteness in order to make them conform to the unity of Ideas. As such, all that escaped the principle of unity, when not subject to speculative re-elaboration, had to be declared nonessential, superfluous, or a flawed aspect of the work.⁴⁷

Thus, although Bernard and Denis defended the classical character of Cézanne's work, they ultimately deemed it incomplete and insufficient in light of the very parameters within which it had been proposed. As a result, Bernard published a series of criticisms and even condemnations of the achievements of the painter. Retrospectively, the symbolist:

saw Cézanne as an incomplete, frustrated 'naïf' and, at the same time, a failed 'savant', a man of natural gifts, especially with regard to color, whose technical science was nonetheless both restrictive and ultimately ineffectual. Cézanne had either lost or had never attained the proper balance of nature and technique.⁴⁸

47 Faced with the gaps, intermittencies or counter-manoeuvres of Cézanne's *facture*, E. Loran created the concept of 'negative space', capable of engendering its subsequent unification with a major Idea, of geometrical tenor. See Loran 1985, p. 132.

48 See Shiff 1986, pp. 130–131. In 1910, Bernard explicitly and incisively affirmed that Cézanne was 'so absorbed by the mechanism of [his own] system of color ... that the memory of any form ... became remote from him. It is unfortunate that this fine genius of a colorist should have remained so incomplete; he had the gifts of a master painter and respected the tradition of the Museums. ... Despite the certain science he acquired of simultaneous contrasts, of planes and of color, I do not advise that one engage in following him. He did not himself – *according to his own testimony* – accomplish the work capable of demonstrating the excellence of his system. ... Only those who have brought their life's work to perfection are to be consulted; one would seriously risk losing oneself in going to ask for the truth of art from *seekers* who have not themselves accomplished their program. ... Let us then learn only from *those who find* [*trouveurs*], and not from these *eternal seekers*, for whom the search only leads them deeper into the morass; let us seek,

Similarly, Maurice Denis described a new classical attitude, pointing to Cézanne as its prophet:

[Cézanne] is so naturally a painter and so spontaneously classical! ... The unfortunate thing is that it is difficult to say without too much obscurity what classicism is ...⁴⁹

The symbolist conception of sensation was pivotal to the issue, as denoted by Denis's affirmation: 'We have discerned classical spontaneity [*la spontanéité classique*] in his [Cézanne's] sensation itself'.⁵⁰ Denis had already written something along the same lines: 'The classical artist synthesizes ... Beauty not only as he sculpts or paints, but (merely) as he looks around'.⁵¹

In fact, the 'classicised' sensation was the cornerstone of the symbolist poetics, for Denis:

The symbolist point of view is that we should consider the work of art as the equivalent of sensation received: nature could then be, for the artist,

but by paths that are sure'. See Bernard 1910, pp. 138–139, apud Shiff 1986, p. 132. For a more detailed description of these statements, summarised by Shiff, some from letters and others from articles, see notes 37–41 on p. 271.

49 See Denis 1912b, pp. 251, 246, apud Shiff 1986, p. 132.

50 See Denis 1912b, p. 254.

51 See Denis 1912a, p. 176. The configuration of a spontaneous classicism, or of a classical intuition coming before all rational construction, seemed to assume an ethnic factor. In any case, Maurice Denis's connections with the French far-right in that period were concrete. Theodore Reff pointed out that, after the parliamentary collapse in 1905 of the Left Bloc in France, the rise of nationalism and neoclassicism, which were closely interrelated, was remarkable in the decade preceding the outbreak of war in 1914, and represented a 'return to order'. Maurice Denis openly supported Charles Maurras, the reactionary and monarchist leader of *L'Action Française*. In the climate of ideological polarisation, marked by the conjunction of classicism and nationalism, Bernard's journal *La Renovation Esthétique* denounced the presence of the *Fauves* (an epithet which already denoted the anticlassical vein of the new movement) which participated in the Salon of 1905, of 'northern names' [sic], and of signs 'of the addition of artistic atheism to religious atheism'. André Pératé, a friend of Denis, also accused the *Fauves* of a 'revolt against the Latin soul', associating them with anarchist movements and positions alien to French tradition. *L'Action Française*, in turn, attributed the colours of 'Fauvist' canvasses, alien to French tradition, to the presence of 'foreigners and Jews' in the group. See, respectively, Reff 1989, pp. 22–25, notes 24–27 on p. 41; Lancien 1905, pp. 18–19; Pératé 1907, p. 356; *L'Action Française*, 28 October 1909. Apud Reff 1989, p. 25–41.

only a state of his own subjectivity. And what we call subjective distortion [*la déformation subjective*], is in practice, style.⁵²

Further on, he continues:

The apparent disorder, the awkward perspectives of a sideboard by Cézanne, tend to locate in the center of the composition the subject of painting ... [We do not] seek the motive [*motif*] ... of the work of art other than in the *individual intuition*, in the spontaneous apperception of a correspondence, of an equivalence between these states of mind and those plastic signs which must translate them with necessity.⁵³

Thus a notion was forged of modernist and anti-conventional classical orientation, capable of comprehending the inability (*gaucherie*) or 'blessed naïveté' as marks of originality, sincerity and the love of art.⁵⁴ Hence the elliptical affirmation from Denis's diary, dated 1903, the:

[C]lassical artist is he who stylizes, synthesizes, harmonizes, simplifies, not only as he paints – which is not difficult – but as he sees.⁵⁵

Thus, the classical spontaneity, advocated by the symbolists as immediately capable of syntheses, harmonies and unifications, was nothing but that which, according to Neoplatonism, was immediately metaphysical, since it was pervaded by and directed toward Oneness. According to this perspective, since art, originated from Oneness, and also constituted a way to return to it, there was no room in this process except for the transparency of the work, as well as for the artist and his technique, in relation to the whole. That is to say, the condition for this was that the subjective nature of the artist and the basic elements of his work (line, colour, form, etc.) were immediately connected to Oneness, established as the origin of all Ideas.

When applied to Cézanne or anyone else, the inevitable consequence of such a tangle of metaphysical assumptions – which, besides the transparency of language, supposed, on the one hand, the immediacy of the relationship between sensation and Idea and, on the other, the enlightened intuition of the unity of all things – could only be a judgement of inadequacy.

52 See Denis 1912c, p. 275.

53 Emphasis added. See Denis 1912c, pp. 276, 278.

54 See Shiff 1986, p. 136.

55 See Denis 1957, apud Shiff 1986, p. 137.

Denis (as well as Bernard) also had reservations about Cézanne's technique and, by reformulating his writings between 1912 and 1920, came to limit his judgements about Cézanne's classicism and to characterise him as a simple primitive, unable to formulate the rules of his own art.

God Save Individualism or a Very British Escape

Roger Fry adopted a similar approach, advocating the overcoming of impressionism through the paradigmatic value of Cézanne's work, and the constitution of a new form of classicism. He defined classical art as the organ of 'a new and otherwise unattainable experience', generated through a 'disinterestedly passionate state of mind'.⁵⁶

For Fry, also using the guiding principle of Neoplatonism, the classic was characterised by directly linking sensibility to the Idea, since a 'work [is] "classic" if it depends on its formal organization to evoke emotion'.⁵⁷

Thus, in general, with the exception of some minor distinctions, the assertions and dilemmas faced by the English critic were similar to those of French symbolism. Underlying Fry's critical thinking with respect to Cézanne's style was the premise of a classic naturalism or spontaneity, capable of unifying all things:

His composition at first sight looks accidental, as though he had sat down before any odd corner of nature and portrayed it; and yet the longer one looks the more satisfactory are the correspondences one discovers, the more carefully felt beneath its subtlety, is the architectural plan; the more absolute, in spite of their astounding novelty, do we find the color harmonies.⁵⁸

The problem of the origin of the 'deformations' or of the elements incompatible with classicism in Cézanne's style, had already been evoked by Bernard, through the dual categories of the 'savant' and the 'naïf'; Denis, for his part, attributed this contradiction to Cézanne's subjectivity.⁵⁹ Having tackled

⁵⁶ See Fry 1998a, p. 169.

⁵⁷ See Fry 1924, p. 152, apud Shiff 1986, p. 142, note 2 on p. 275.

⁵⁸ See Fry 1996, p. 91; see also Shiff 1986, p. 143.

⁵⁹ For a different emphasis, by Fry, highlighting the 'creative vision' of Cézanne, and, as Shiff affirms, '[evoking] an impressionist ideal of direct vision', and an endless creativity and search, see Shiff 1986, p. 195.

the same issue and after several oscillations in the course of his writings,⁶⁰ Fry concluded in 1927:

It is probable that Cézanne was himself ignorant of these deformations [in the rendering of still-life forms in perspective]. I doubt if he deliberately calculated them; they came almost as an unconscious response to a need for the most evident *formal harmony*.⁶¹

Thus, the final deadlock is the same in every Neoplatonic plot, when opposed to the facts: the unity and harmony of the system *versus* the lack of unity of reality. On the one hand, there was the organisational principle; Cézanne's *design*, achieved through 'extremely simple geometrical forms', and on the other, his 'visual sensations', which caused the shapes to be 'infinitely and infinitesimally modified at each point'.⁶² 'Cézanne's synthesis' was, according to these commentators, unfeasible ('incapable of complete realization').⁶³

At the same time, common sense helped Fry forge a very British escape from aporia, stressing the mythic individuality of Cézanne:

In a world where the individual is squeezed and moulded and polished by the pressure of his fellowmen the artist remains irreclaimably individual – in a world where every one else is being perpetually educated, the artist remains ineducable ... Cézanne realised the type of the artist in its purest, most unmitigated form ...⁶⁴

Cézanne, between Immediacy and Construction

The crisis of the single and formalist narrative of modernism, which came as a byproduct of neoliberalism,⁶⁵ allowed for the partial reopening of the 'dossier of modern art'.⁶⁶

60 See Shiff 1986, pp. 148–149.

61 Emphasis added. See Fry 1958, pp. 48–49, apud Shiff 1986, p. 149, note 29 on p. 277.

62 See Fry 1958, p. 53, apud Shiff 1986, p. 152.

63 See Fry 1958, apud Shiff 1986, pp. 149–152.

64 See Fry 1998b, p. 179.

65 In turn, neoliberalism camouflaged the apogee of the monopolies and finance under the banner of deregulation, free enterprise, and opportunist uses of multiculturalism (see the cases of warmongers Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice).

66 For aspects of an earlier episode of the crucial reopening of the 'Manet case' – a corner-

Thus, after remarkable and sustained research (1979–1984), Richard Shiff has presented another view of Cézanne's work, largely antithetical to the formalist one. In effect, in *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism*, instead of 'classicising' and elevating Cézanne above his own time – according to the dominant formalist-based tradition – Shiff situates him historically as a critical inflection of impressionism and the moment of a new pictorial synthesis that is realist in tenor.

In contrast to the emphasis on 'classicism', Shiff explained Cézanne's style through the notion of a 'technique of originality', which he also applied to impressionism. This encompassed various procedures in order to emphasise spontaneity, sincerity, etc., based on the immediacy of sensation.⁶⁷

Resorting to the idea of a 'technique of originality' implied viewing Cézanne and impressionism according to the actualisation of realism. Through the notion of a 'technique of originality', Shiff overcame the antinomy inherent in the polarisation between the spontaneous and the classical, which constituted the motto of most studies of Cézanne. The notion came from the analysis of Shiff's academic advisor, Robert Herbert. The latter examined Monet's application of impasto in order to engender a 'texture of spontaneity'. Similarly, for Shiff, the notion of a 'technique of originality' – which can also be extended to other aspects of Monet's painting – corresponds to 'a style of spontaneity and immediacy'.⁶⁸

By viewing spontaneity as a construction, Shiff negated the hypothesis that Cézanne was primitive or lacking in consciousness, at the margins of pictorial traditions – a hypothesis that was ultimately adopted by the symbolists.⁶⁹ For Shiff, Cézanne's painting was indeed born of an 'intentional forgetting'⁷⁰ or abdication of pictorial knowledge in favour of the 'principle of direct observation', according to the primacy of sensation.

stone of formalist narrative – see the first pages of 'The Returns of Regicide' and 'Parisian Scenes', in this volume.

67 See Shiff 1986, pp. 111–123.

68 See Shiff 1986, p. 111.

69 A comment by Fry is illustrative of this position, which extols Cézanne's historical role and genius, while depriving him of consciousness: 'In essentials the principles of [the postimpressionists] are diametrically opposed to those of Impressionism ... [The impressionists'] aim was still purely representative ... exactly how they came to make the transition from an entirely representative to a non-representative and expressive art must always be something of a mystery, and the mystery lies in the strange and unaccountable originality of a man of genius ... Cezanne. What he did seems to have been done almost unconsciously'. See Fry 1911, pp. 866–867, apud Shiff 1986, p. 160, note 20 on p. 280.

70 See Shiff 1986, p. 111.

According to Shiff, Cézanne's claim that '[we must] give the image of what we see, forgetting all that has existed before us'⁷¹ could be aligned with equivalent propositions by Manet, emphasising the importance of observation above any form of pictorial convention. With this criterion, a watershed was established.

The realism à *outrance*, thus outlined, made clear Cézanne's similarity with Courbet⁷² and Daumier, and with impressionism itself as a specific outgrowth of realism. In contrast, the distance between Cézanne and symbolism became more acute when examined in light of the principle of 'direct observation'. In effect, some of Cézanne's letters indicated that Bernard did not fully grasp his emphasis on 'direct observation', given the symbolist's penchant for spirituality.⁷³

Shiff suggests 'direct observation', which was inseparable from the notion of a 'technique of originality', in fact constituted the cornerstone of Cézanne's language. In this sense, in Cézanne's work the idea of 'direct observation' went beyond a certain way of relating to empirical facts. Rather, it could be oriented towards a reflection that could generate new techniques and a different regime of production. Thus, the notion of a 'technique of originality', in relation to Cézanne, embraced the use of artificial or fabricated strokes, that is, the use of pseudo-vestiges of 'direct observation', which were elaborated by the painter in an intentional and controlled way, even in the absence of a direct process of observation.⁷⁴ So this was a technically constructed kind of spontaneity, of mediated authenticity or sincerity, which implied the plane of objectivity, and not just the plane of pure subjectivity, as in the case of impressionist painters.

Thus, for example, when dealing with a theme of classical origin, such as the bathers, Cézanne also subjected it to the techniques of 'direct observation'. In these paintings with their imaginary roots, made in the studio or derived from pre-existing illustrations, he used chromatic combinations like the yellow-green luminous pair, similar to those used to signal 'direct observation' in landscapes generated en plein air.⁷⁵

71 See Cézanne 1937, pp. 276–277, apud Shiff 1986, p. 113, note 31 on p. 266.

72 '[B]etween the impressionists and Courbet, [Cézanne] eventually chose Courbet, ... the realist-bohemian [Courbet] who paved the way for all vanguards of our century' (Argan 1981b, pp. 186–187).

73 See Shiff 1986, p. 113.

74 'In other words, the technique (or resultant style) of Cézanne's art communicates a message of "direct observation" even when the subject matter can be recognized as an imaginative invention' (Shiff 1986, p. 115).

75 See, for example, according to Shiff, Cézanne's *Bathers* (*Baigneuses*, 1874–1875) or *The Pond* (*Au Bord de l'Étang*, 1877–1880).

It can be deduced from this that the application of the so-called principle of 'direct observation', regardless of where the painting was executed – outdoors, according to the impressionist precept, or based on historical sources, in the manner of Manet – in Cézanne's case, always implied the predominance of practice over any other formal or natural instance. Incidentally, this was in accordance with the more lively tradition of realism, in open confrontation with all pictorial conventions.

But in this sense, how do we distinguish Cézanne from his predecessors? Or, from the angle of the labour process, to return to the motto of the decisive question after 1871, as proposed at the beginning of this essay, let us ask: what was the stance of his pictorial work in face of the dualism between intellectual and physical labour?

Work as Mode and Motive

In fact, Shiff's analysis, even if attached to the history of art *tout court*, is widely documented by texts from the time and testimonies. Such thorough contextual research offers a new starting point for thinking about Cézanne with greater scope and historical insight.

Thus, if the combination of 'direct observation' and 'techniques of originality' came to nurture and value pictorial practice, it is worth asking under what terms this took place. According to Shiff: 'Two interrelated features thus define Cézanne's single technique of originality: his concern for detail and his development of a unifying pattern'.⁷⁶

A concern with the detail, as a mark of sincerity, could be divided into two aspects: 1) an 'attention to peculiarities of the [geographical] site',⁷⁷ evident in the interest in things, which was concretely distinct from the metaphysical love of nature or being, corresponding to the loss of interest in living beings, typical of Monet's pantheism or of the symbolist belief in the unity of all things; 2) a process of pictorial elaboration from part to part, which favoured details, being intrinsically fragmentary or dissociated from the Idea, supposedly translatable into composition or unity of the whole.

Let us leave for the moment the question of the painter's attention to the specific object portrayed. It is the second aspect – the fragmentary mode – that is less evident and thus calls for close examination, as highlighted by Shiff.

⁷⁶ See Shiff 1986, p. 116.

⁷⁷ See Shiff 1986, p. 117.

According to descriptions of his painting process, Cézanne's intrinsically fragmentary mode of working, moving from part to part, intrigued friends and observers. The artists and critics R.P. Rivière and J.F. Schnerb⁷⁸ watched Cézanne at work. According to Shiff's summary they found that the painter:

worked from part to part on his canvases, allowing one form to define the adjacent one, as if the end of this free process could not be foreseen. Moreover, they discovered that Cézanne was aware of the distortion and fragmentary nature of his image; yet he would make no corrections, being unwilling even to cover awkward bare patches of canvas. He seemed obsessed with a concern with 'sincerity' (Rivière's and Schnerb's term) to the point of accepting absolutely the results of his own immediate pictorial expression.⁷⁹

Besides Rivière and Schnerb, Bernard too, despite his unitarian convictions, had noted with surprise Cézanne's discontinuous mode of working. Thus, on 5 February 1904, after his first visit to the painter, Bernard wrote: 'Cézanne's canvases are made of pieces. He leaves white [spaces] in them everywhere ...'.⁸⁰

The apparent state of incompleteness can be explained by the method of working by parts. Cézanne's works convey the non-finite, 'as if more parts could easily be added'. Working from part to part also explained the absence of a central focus, or the fact that Cézanne's images 'often reach the edges of the canvas indecisively'. And the principle of discontinuity was also responsible for the fact that 'having painted many parts ... with equal attention and intensity, [he denied] them any differentiating hierarchy'.⁸¹

Cézanne's second 'technique of originality' involved the development of a unifying pattern. According to Shiff, this pattern should be considered in interrelation with the process of detailed or discontinuous work. The colours, the luminosity, and the brushwork enabled the construction of a patterned way of painting.

78 While Schnerb, a painter, printmaker and art theorist, is relatively well-known, there is very little information on the life of R.P. Rivière, also a printmaker and writer. The article written by both, 'L'atelier de Cézanne', recalling a visit to Cézanne in January 1905, was published in *La Grande Revue* on 25 December 1907, pp. 811–817 (see Rivière and Schnerb 1907). For its transcript, see Doran 1978, pp. 85–91.

79 See Shiff 1986, p. 116.

80 See Bernard 1954, p. 4, apud Shiff 1986, p. 116, note 42 on p. 267.

81 See Shiff 1986, pp. 116–117.

First, it should be noted that this process undermined tradition and went against the refinement that was typical of the artisanal tradition of painting, whose mastery exalted unique solutions over the predictability of the means.

For Shiff, Cézanne's confrontation with tradition resulted from a considered and conscious revolution, unlike the psychological hypotheses raised by many commentators.⁸² In the tradition of painting, colour and luminosity were evaluative modes, or modes of hierarchising themes. Combined with the chiaroscuro device, these modes were used to qualify volumes, distances, and meanings in the pictorial field.

In contrast to such procedures, Cézanne prioritised the juxtaposition of colours, often resorting to light tones and vivid and bright colours. Among other things, these changes led to unconventional and non-hierarchical spacings and interactions.

Work Site

It should be noted that the result, according to the noted patternisation, was translated into 'a sense of uniform illumination, a light that encompasses but does not determine or define'.⁸³ Thus this way of working resulted in the construction of a new pictorial medium in synthesis that was fundamentally different from the system of values that had historically developed from the geometric space of the Renaissance and the new economy of light, originally conceived by Caravaggio.

Analogously, by refusing all spatial hierarchisation and differentiation, the patternisation of size and the regularity of Cézanne's brushstrokes homogenised and unified the canvas.

Thus, the canvas was actually converted into something analogous to an operational or work field, in which the gestures sought not the unity or singular-

82 For a review of the 'psychological' interpretations of Cézanne, including those by Fry, Schapiro and Reff, and the opposite perspective of Shiff in his interpretation of the stylistic choices of Cézanne as a result of conscious choices, see Shiff 1986, note 38 on pp. 266–267.

83 See Shiff 1986, p. 112. For examples of this pattern, see the following from Cézanne: *View of Auvers* (*Vue Panoramique d'Auvers-sur-Oise*, c. 1874); *Bathers* (*Baigneuses*, 1874–1875); *The Pond* (*Au Bord de l'Étang*, 1877–1880); *Winter Landscape, Giverny* (*Paysage d'Hiver [Giverny]*, 1894); *Saint-Henri and the Gulf of Marseilles* (*Saint-Henri et le Golfe de Marseille*, c. 1883–1885) and *The Gulf of Marseilles Seen from l'Estaque* (*Le Golfe de Marseille Vu de l'Estaque*, c. 1883–1885).

ity of the autographic pictorial act, but rather a method of patternisation which rationally analysed and decomposed effort into minimum units of action. In relation to the pictorial work, this analysis and decomposition entailed their division into minimum elements, brushstrokes, and basic colours.⁸⁴

In this way Cézanne introduced strange patterns of uniformity into painting. Patternisation gave the canvas a merely fabricated unity, distinct from any preliminary idea or composition.⁸⁵

In making explicit the evidently discontinuous status of the manufactured object, Cézanne's painting cast aside the *a priori* value distinction between the mythical uniqueness of the work of art, as a paradigmatic result of a unique artisanal mastery, and current productive work, realised abstractly and in a standardised yet partial way.

In short, in Cézanne's mode, painting ceased to be an *art* form – in the sense implied by the term, as a special activity, ontologically singular and privileged – and was instead re-qualified as an equivalent of labour.

Therefore, in the new structure – which was not the result of a previously prepared composition – the procedures, their effects and constituent elements, all the pictorial elements that had been primarily symbolic were now presented as signs of labour.

In the new terms, the pictorial unity, of phenomenal tenor and of a merely material order – since it was generated *a posteriori* – stood as intrinsically distinct from that *a priori* unity, which, in the tradition of Western art, contained a unique symbolic value in relation to the classical model based on the metaphysical principle of harmony. In order to understand why there have been so many misunderstandings, it is worth recalling that the symbolists and formalists presupposed harmony as a foundation and value. They then sought in vain for a reunion with the unity of Ideas in Cézanne's canvasses.

From this angle, one can note a Copernican revolution in painting, triggered by realism. In Manet and Cézanne, painting was endowed with negativity vis-

84 See, for example, in this sense, the smooth and repetitive texture of the serially arranged brushstrokes of Cézanne's *Turn in the Road* (*La Route Tournante*, 1881), to the point of evoking the characteristics of an industrial manufacturing process.

85 The absence of composition in Cézanne was observed by Denis, who, according to his own ideas, introduced the idea of a further unity: 'The entire canvas is a tapestry where each color *plays* separately and yet mingles its sonority in the ensemble. The characteristic aspect of Cézanne's painting derives from this juxtaposition, from this mosaic of separate tones gently merging one into the other'. See Denis 1912b, pp. 257–259. The claim that Cézanne employed little or no 'composition in the usual sense' was made by Novotny 1938, apud Shiff 1986, p. 123, notes 46 and 47 on p. 268.

à-vis the ongoing changes in labour relations following the massacre of the Commune and the elimination of the artisanal mode of production.

Similarly, one can now recognise that Cézanne's words – when he admitted the primitive nature of his own work – were misunderstood by Bernard. Therefore, far from characterising psychological or confessional acts of a primitive or *naïf*, they were established as historical judgements.⁸⁶ Such acts manifested a consciousness convinced of its own position in a moment of rupture or historical upheaval, aware of having sketched the consistent pathway that would become later the historically and objectively validated road of a critical discourse.

However, in his critical minority and with back turned to the historical process, the symbolist subjectivised this sentence and recast it according to his own understanding. Thus, as we saw in the image of Cézanne he disseminated, Bernard thought he was in the presence of a brilliant if depressed and incapable primitive.

Process-Painting: One Step Further

From the point of view of current observers, Cézanne's way of working from part to part produced imbalanced effects associated with asymmetry, disproportionality and distortion of volumes. In addition, despite aspects of patternisation, it also involved arrhythmias and disturbances due to the fragmentation of lines, gaps in shapes and in the chromatic fabric, etc. Amid such effects there were short and measured brushstrokes that, despite being serially regular, were arranged in small blocks, according to vectors of divergent directions.

By combining antinomic effects arising from tense and unresolved relations, Cézanne's work put the observer in an active position. Cézanne mobilised the observer's consciousness, since he situated it in an open process, which continued to create paradoxes throughout the duration of observation. How to specify such dialectics?

Dynamics of the Gaze

From the perspective of the observer, what exactly happened when painting no longer appeared to be completed or stabilised? As one can still verify today,

86 See footnote 5.

if the observer remains before a painting for a long time – difficult though this can be with the current speed of hyper-circulation – at every glance Cézanne's works apparently change, having no fixed configuration.

One does not reconnect with the image obtained just a moment before. We no longer see the same picture. There is a change in visual references, indicative of relations of mass, volume, dimension, distance, luminosity, etc.

The paradox of discontinuity successively renews itself with each glance, turning observers back on themselves. It makes evident to them the spontaneity, the living and instantaneous force of their own perceptual work. But precisely what does the power of the painter involve?

If the viewer's gaze never manages to recover the impression from the previous moment, it is because in the polysemy of brushstrokes and tones, the references, arranged on the canvas, seem to change places; they forever propose new relationships and different directions with each visual scan.⁸⁷

Thus, for the observer the painting takes shape in a succession of moments and sensations. By multiplying intertwinements and suggestions, the picture presents itself as if endowed with movement. How and why does it do so?

The effects of motion in these paintings derive from a physiological mechanism. The suggestions and entanglements mentioned above affect the observer to the extent that the expectations of order and balance, embedded in the gaze like a systematic programme, do not come to be fulfilled. Then, a physiological propensity to optical compensation, before the shift or intermittence of the visual phenomenon, is stimulated like a spring or motor reflex. This forces the gaze to complete the interrupted phenomenon on its own and according to expectations.

Knowledge of these optical habits has a long heritage and was mastered by Athenian sculptors. The sculpture *Diskobolos* of Myron,⁸⁸ for example, also based its effect in this physiological characteristic. The suggested effect of the *Diskobolos* statue consists in 'stopping movement in a very brief moment, before the [discus thrower] releases the discus'.⁸⁹ Such poses or moments were chosen on the basis of a rational analysis of movement represented as potency or in the imminence of the act. Through these moments, the Greek classical artist urged the viewer to imagine its unfolding. The constructed interruption,

87 'Conventional landscapes ... invited the eye along a path of illumination that one might follow in a clearly determined direction. Cézanne's paintings instead offer multiple and competing possibilities for movement. In facing them, a viewer might lose his pictorial orientation; Cézanne simply did not follow the usual visual rules' (Shiff 1986, pp. 121–123).

88 *Diskobolos* (Roman copy in marble [of a Greek original c. 460 BC]).

89 See Pollitt 1998, p. 58. See Also Gombrich 1979, pp. 58–59.

the contrast between moving on and stopping, generated a sensory play. And just as the symmetry gave an idea of equilibrium and stability, so the organised surprise synthetically generated the image of movement.

Therefore, Cézanne drew from a rational decomposition of movement, to convey the sensation caused by process of flow. Incidentally, the process was of a similar tenor to that of cinema that was emerging at the time. What the film image promoted on a mass scale, by suspending from one frame to another, the systematising routine of the gaze, triggering the retinal mechanism and inducing it to believe in the movement, was something similar to what Cézanne did in the gap between one series of brushstrokes and another: he provoked the retina, so that it spontaneously completed the image.

A similar process occurred with his use of colour. It is known that Cézanne sought, like Van Gogh, to turn colour into a new means of representing space.⁹⁰ For neither of them was this a static space, amenable to geometric representation. Thus, from the mid-1870s it was no longer possible to find, in Cézanne's canvasses, either a stable notion of local colour or a notion of tonal unity.

It is worth recalling, in contrast, most impressionist canvasses took the path to a regime of pictorial restoration or, in other words, *the recomposition of tonal unity during reception*.

90 In a letter to Bernard (Aix-en-Provence, 15 April 1904), Cézanne posited the use of colours as a new means of stereometric conception and representation. In this finding, which replaced the geometric and linear mode of stereometric representation by a new system, the colours took on a fundamental and strategic role, instituting a new medium and new vision. Thus, Cézanne affirmed: 'Now, nature, for us men, is more depth than surface, hence the need to introduce into our vibration of light, represented by reds and yellows, a sufficient amount of blue, to make the air palpable'. Thus, where usually and thoughtlessly nothing or only an endless transparency was seen, Cézanne saw the distance and air in light of the subject's experience, and sought to represent this through the blue colour, turning visible the non-visible space, through the colour that replaced the abstract character of the line as a representational notation. For Cézanne's letter to Bernard, see Cachin and Watkins 1996, p. 18. In another letter to Bernard (Aix-en-Provence, 23 December 1904), Cézanne said: 'Here's something that can't be disputable, I'm quite sure about this: an optical sensation is produced in our visual organ that makes us classify by light, half-tones or quarter-tones, the planes represented by color sensations'. See Cachin and Watkins 1996, p. 19.

Dialectic

In Cézanne, the tense and permanent work of pictorial conflict, or a dialectics of colour, opposed the aesthetic step backwards promoted by impressionism. Thus, before the multiplied entanglements, the very individuation of colours became problematic. With each new glimpse, the tones retroactively disagreed, they ceased to be what they were, or became uncertain. Through the ironic introduction of green in the sky, of blue in the earth, etc., local definitions were suspended, giving way to a new and unexpected chromatic relationship.

Thus, through the use of colour, there also emerged ambiguity in the definition of physical limits and the stable forms of objects. The number of tones and brushstrokes fragmented all integrity or the linear definition of the figures, and dissolved any memory of local colour.

Analogously, there was a dissolution of the idea of a previous space or of static objects, in short, of elements strange to and appearing before painting. What remained was evidence of the painter's work process.

Destabilised, the observer felt compelled to focus on his own process of perception, for references spontaneously produced in the course of his experience of observation. What could possibly come out of such dialectic?

Notes on the Economy of Process-Painting

In works of the 1890s, such as *Rocks in the Forest* (*Rochers à Fontainebleau*, c. 1896–1900), oil paint applied in thin successive layers, similar to a water-colour, signalled the emergence of one colour inside another. Nothing seemed stable or permanent.

Thus, mobilised by the transient nature of its economy, vision started to pose itself as a temporal activity shaped by a fleeting situation or point of view. Nothing could be farther from the timeless contemplation of the supra-temporal forms of Ideas, to which the symbolists aspired.

To correlate such a chromatic economy with the issue of form and space, we must consider that the work of oblique and broken lines came to have topical effects of depth in Cézanne's canvasses. But on account of their intermittency and disconnection, they never allowed for the systematisation of perspective.

The logic of this order specifically opposed the logic of linear perspective, based on the systematics of permanent rules of geometry and of mathematical proportions and also often alluding to a pre-existing space.

As such, the depths constituted in Cézanne's canvasses appeared as partial and contradictory, that is, they instituted form as a dynamic complex and

restructured the relationship between subject and space, as an oscillation or problem; the segmentation of line fused the object to the surrounding space and, consequently, also situated it in time, like the athlete of Myron.

In this way, any simple opposition or duality between the subject and the world ceased to subsist. In its place were open situations, according to unsystematic or fundamentally sentient and discontinuous coordinates, related to the self as a psychophysical pole. The very organisation of brushstrokes, in small series forming blocks, came to suggest a living rhythm, irregular and discontinuous, similar to breathing.

In sum, through such procedures Cézanne's pictorial work suspended or challenged the coordinates of visual representation so as to trigger a reflexive process, intrinsically mediated by temporal experience, around spatial and volumetric definitions.

From broken symmetries, as well as chromatic expectations, empty areas or differences emerged a living and problematic space-time complex.

Out of these gaps, filled by ocular motor reflexes, grew an illusion of movement in Cézanne's works – for example, the view of the wind in the tree leaves – and the feeling of time passing.

The Living Labour Mode

What is the meaning of this experience, the result of which, for some symbolists, seemed to be eminently negative or dissolving?

Let us synthetically recapitulate the steps of Cézanne's pictorial reflection. Without aiming at any absolute, *a priori* form or Idea, and referring exclusively to the gaze as a phenomenal operation, Cézanne observed the constitution of sight in a situation. That is, he viewed sight as having an intrinsic relation to the simultaneous experience of the space-time complex.⁹¹

91 According to Cézanne, nature 'falls before our eyes [and] give[s] us the picture ... [we must] give the image of what we see, forgetting all that has existed before us'. See Cézanne's letter to Bernard (Aix-en-Provence, 23 October 1905), apud Shiff 1986, p. 113, note 31 on p. 266. For a different translation, see also Cachin and Watkins 1996, pp. 17–18. Meyer Schapiro's acute description of the painter's vision could also be applied to the experience of seeing Cézanne's painting, which dissolved the unity of vision into a process, presented as temporal experience. According to Schapiro: '[Cézanne] loosened the perspective system of traditional art and gave to the space of the image the aspect of a world created free-hand and put together piecemeal *from successive perceptions*, rather than offered complete to the eye in one coordinating glance as in the ready-made geometrical per-

However, what was this time as sensed by the observer? If impressionism aimed at the 'atmospheric' instant, then Cézanne's instant was a different one. His was the instant of the genetic process of perception in consciousness, as well as of the act of painting on the canvas; a painting established in the mode of the sensation and as the dialectical correlate of the consciousness of perception. This was carried out through the procedures and operations mentioned above.

Cézanne's stated purpose was to revalidate form, but on the condition of making it more dynamic. In effect, by establishing the link between observation and the experience of successive sensations and instants, Cézanne grounded the revalidation of form in a new aesthetic pact. This came without the mediation of contemplation or form, but instead made explicit the process of production of the form. As a result, the form was dynamic and materialised.

Moreover, in the new aesthetic pact proposed to the observer, the legitimisation of form occurred dialogically. It was processed simultaneously alongside the cooperative consciousness of the phenomenised subject in such a way that by observing the canvas he collaborated in the constitution of form, rooting it in the moment and turning it into a phenomenon.⁹²

This move established a *phenomenal and dialogical form*, corresponding to the process of a consciousness physically implemented and active. Such a consciousness could therefore be compared with the consciousness of work, when work was laid out as a metabolised clash between a non-transcendental subject and its materials.

The tension inherent in the work of consciousness – as an incessant synthesis of imbalances and tensions belonging to the immanent insertion of the subject as a phenomenised, situated being – was reflected in the inconclusive character of Cézanne's works.

The consciousness of the observer experienced and saw in such works its own effort to step back from the multiplicity of sensations and perceptions to the synthetic but never peaceful unity which ensures its operation.

spective of Renaissance art'. See Schapiro 1962, p. 10, apud Shiff 1986, p. 195, note 43 on p. 296.

92 Bernard was astonished by Cézanne's improvisations, according to Shiff: '[B.] observed Cézanne at work on a still-life of three skulls ... and commented that the painting "changed color and form nearly every day". ... Truly his manner of study was a meditation, brush in hand'. See Bernard 1907, p. 395. See Rivière and Schnerb 1907, pp. 815–816, apud Shiff 1986, p. 192, note 31 on p. 295. According to Shiff, the painting Bernard observed was possibly *Three Skulls* (*Trois Crânes*, c. 1900).

In other words, the real object of Cézanne's 'direct observation' resided in the living work of consciousness itself as a phenomenon among others – of consciousness which organised itself in a situation, in its clash with painting as a mode of visual manufacture, based on sensation, metabolised and turned into reflection.

In short, the threshold posed by the discovery of process-painting stimulated the overcoming of the representational dimension of art. Also, it postulated an object with value in its own right – work as living substance. This was an object made from internal linkages, rather than founded on some connection to an external instance.⁹³

This discovery consolidated a new notion of realism – one that was entirely different from the naïve version derived from naturalism. The realism of processual art was founded in a phenomenal and materialist consciousness. It prioritised the reflexive act of making explicit manufacture and its connections, that is, the disclosure of the work, rather than the traditional function of representing preliminary forms, whose end could only match that of every commodity – namely, not being enjoyed by the labourer, but destined for a third party through exchange.

This realism sought to escape such a fate by focusing primarily on its own process despite any extraneous judgement of its own forms; hence the accusations of misanthropy against Cézanne. But one could conclude that this form of realism aimed at authentically autonomous actions and objects, in relation to form and content or purpose.

93 Note, in this sense, the decisive role that Russian constructivists attributed to Cézanne's research, according to Tarabukin: 'While it was in its heyday, Impressionism, a mainly illusionistic trend, engendered a reaction within itself: it was Cézanne who placed colour above the illusionism of light, a goal which was pursued with great effort by the impressionist artists. After Cézanne, painters began to concentrate their full attention on the effective material structure of the canvas, that is, on colour, texture, construction and on the material itself'. And later, in the same vein: 'The problem of Constructivism as a purely pictorial notion was consciously laid out for the first time by Cézanne's works. Before Cézanne, this idea was found in painters' consciousness, one might say, in a potential state. But now we are able to discover it even in ancient art. Cézanne, a prophet in many realms, had – especially in this one – anticipated this idea, realised it empirically, and sowed the seeds of the future. In his canvasses we see a sound and well constituted surface, colour applied with a firm hand, a remarkably well-worked texture, great rigour in the chromatic whole, an absence of dilettantism and the presence of the highest professional skill, behind which we perceive a sound culture. All these indications provide a basis for considering his canvasses as pictorially-constructivist, that is, well-constructed

This counterpoint should be scrutinised in order to better distinguish the reach of Cézanne's aesthetic strategy. In abstract social labour, serially consumed in the factory or elsewhere, abstraction, division and quantification isolate production from contact with sensation, which is inseparable from living labour. Thus, the current division of labour – constituted prior to the productive act or from *a priori* forms connected to the distinction between intellectual and physical labour – suppresses the active participation of sensation in production. As such, the possibility for the labourer to reflect on his own spontaneity, and hence on his own power to manufacture and appropriate the product of his own labour, is blocked.

In turn, the disclosing of the formation process, in the works of Cézanne, by turning to the living and temporal relationship between consciousness and its materials, came to counteract the pulverisation and concealment of the elements inherent to labour in its current social form, destined to the production of commodities. Thus, with the irreducibility and resistance of a *communard* of painting, Cézanne's work responded to and counteracted the new social organisation of labour instituted in France after the Commune massacre.

Regarding the question proposed at the outset of this chapter, we can conclude that the object *par excellence* of such a realism consisted in the exemplary process of autonomous or emancipated living labour – unrealisable in the current mode of social labour, after the split between intellectual and physical labour.

Van Gogh

Like Cézanne, Van Gogh sought to replace the geometric conception of space with another kind of stereometric notation that would adopt colour as a primary means to represent volume, depth, etc.

If both Cézanne and Van Gogh read the 'book of the world' on the basis of chromatics, then their alternatives arose through different conceptions and presented two distinct patterns of unfolding; the task of reconfiguring them was left to posterity, and to cubism in particular.⁹⁴

from the point of view of the organisation of the material elements in them'. See Taraboukine 1980n, pp. 34, 44–45.

94 According to an account by Bernard, a common interlocutor, incomprehension existed between the two artists. Van Gogh, in a letter to Bernard of June 1888, observed 'the clumsy

The Cézannian path, though constantly referred to the empirical aspect of sensation, while actually establishing the notation of volume and depth in chromatic terms, was predominantly mental and eminently reflexive. It was essentially mediated by an analysis of pictorial language. As such, his directive re-enabled the connection between intellectual labour and the spontaneity of the senses, while emphasising the former.

Cézanne's actions on his canvasses, though incomplete and fragmented, were articulated as elements of a code under formation. In their condition as signs, they significantly differed from the things in the world to which they referred.⁹⁵ In this sense, the basic elements of his pictorial work, the disciplined or modular mode of his brushstrokes, and his limited palette, resulted from fundamental reductions, through which the division between language and the world was unequivocally laid out. In these terms, although a result of phenomenal and immanent consciousness, and of an unprecedented degree of dialogical reflexivity with regard to tradition, Cézanne's pictorial work participated in the Leonardian premise of painting as a *cosa mentale* [mental thing],⁹⁶ actualising it.

touch Cézanne had shown in some of his studies', and ends up linking this failure to the fact that Cézanne worked outdoors, 'when the Mistral [wind] was blowing'. See Van Gogh 1950, vol. 3, p. 499. On the other hand, Bernard tells that in the course of a casual meeting at the store of Tanguy, Cézanne had exclaimed to Van Gogh: 'Honestly, you paint like a madman [*Sincèrement, vous faites une peinture de fou!*]'! See Bernard 1907, 'Julien Tanguy', p. 607. For other critiques from Cézanne of Van Gogh and Gauguin, see his letter to Bernard from 15 April 1904, in Cézanne 1937, p. 260, apud Shiff 1986, respectively, pp. 166–167, note 36 on p. 284 and p. 163, note 15 on p. 282.

95 See, for example, *The Garden at Les Lauves* (*Le Jardin des Lauves*, c. 1906), a limit-work, among the most lacunary of Cézanne's. It shows that the painter's research gave priority to a new syntax. In this work, besides a profusion of gaps, the brushstrokes, once pressed against the canvas, emphasised its surface. In addition, the literal effect thus obtained participated in the construction of a new structure – although it also escaped it – and finally intertwined with other signs, like the imaginary line of the horizon in this case.

96 Cézanne stressed the intrinsically reflexive tenor of his own poetics to more than one interlocutor. To Bernard, he insisted that 'painting [is] both a logic and an optics'. See Bernard 1921, p. 27, apud Rubin 1977, note 67 on p. 198. In this article, Rubin pointed out 'how clearly conceptual [is] the character of his [Cézanne's] art'. See Rubin 1977, pp. 162–165. Cézanne emphasised the same thing when, in words quoted by Gasquet, he affirmed: 'The nature of the outside and that of the inside (he touches his own brow), must be merged. You told me the other day about Kant. Perhaps I will tell you nonsense, but to me it seems that I will be the subjective consciousness of this landscape, and my canvas, the objective consciousness. My canvas and the landscape, one and another outside of me,

For Van Gogh, in contrast, colour came to mimic, in a more transformative than representational mode, drives and correlated somatic forces. In such a manner, colour, as the force of pathos, made explicit the metabolic appropriation of the use of objects, through their chromatic metamorphosis. Conversely, in regard to Cézanne, Van Gogh aimed not at an intrinsic distinction between signs and things, but at establishing, through affect, unprecedented direct links with the things of the world. Van Gogh thus provided realism with a new key or meaning, in principle somatically mediated.

In this sense, Van Gogh's re-elaboration of the pictorial practice included at least three fundamental elements incompatible with the contemplative pictorial model: 1) the reorganisation of the pictorial space no longer related to cognitive depth, but rather as excess or accumulation of pictorial matter on the canvas; 2) the correlated conception of form founded not in a mental act that designed outlines according to the neoclassical scheme, but in the manner of an organic and expansive formation, pictorially engendered from the excess of lines or brushstrokes, and from the immoderate use of chromatic material; and subjectively, in the terms of an overflowing of the self or of a dynamic of driven appropriation of objects, that is, of the constitution of the world from expended energy; 3) the construction of a literal and frontal space, which positioned the painting in direct contact or in an almost metabolic relationship with the observer. In this way, it was fundamentally opposed to the contemplative practice founded upon the Kantian definition of 'disinterested' judgement, that is, on fundamentally abstract bases.

A parallel process took place in Cézanne's pictorial work. In some way it was even similar to the construction of a palpable and prominent space, which since the explosion of a Renaissance geometric pictorial plane or the Albertian *vetro tralucente*⁹⁷ had inverted the pyramid, reverting the vanishing point and orientating it towards the observer facing the canvas, converging with his point of view.⁹⁸

but the second chaotic, ephemeral, confusing, without logical life, without any rationality; the first lasting, categorised, participant of the modality of ideas'. See Hess 1958, p. 23, apud Menna 1975, pp. 25–26.

97 See footnote 26.

98 Referring to this inversion of the traditional process of spatial representation, whose assimilation was one of the marks of the beginning of cubism, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, the collaborator, *marchand* and interpreter close to cubist artists, explained in *Der Weg zum Kubismus* (Munich: Delphin-Verlag, 1920): 'Representation of the position of objects in space is done as follows: instead of beginning from a supposed foreground and going on from there to give an illusion of depth by means of perspective, the painter begins from a

In Van Gogh's case, however, the process of developing a new pictorial spatiality led to the restructuring of his paintings in a more physical and literal manner, as a 'corporeal thing', to recall Leonardo's famous expression. In this way, Van Gogh reinforced and complemented the association, already laid out by Cézanne, between the pictorial process and the experience of labour as a transforming power. But Van Gogh's focus was primarily on physical labour and on the metabolising action, on the use of things.

The Issue of Immigration: Places, Ideas and Modes

In his first artistic attempts, which date to the early 1880s, Van Gogh (like Cézanne) held to the fruitful common core of romanticism and realism – a core that had its paradigmatic branch and moral landmark in Daumier.

Similarly, early in his career Van Gogh added the dramatic luminosity of Rembrandt to aspects extracted from the realism of Daumier and Courbet and from the rusticity of Millet and the Barbizon school. He also adopted explicitly anti-capitalist viewpoints and gave heroic traits to labourers in general.⁹⁹

Incidentally, we know that before deciding from the 1800s onwards to pursue an artistic formation, Van Gogh tried a religious vocation and dedicated himself for two years (1878–1880) to evangelising coal miners in Borinage, in Southern Belgium.

A few years later, when referring to his now famous *The Potato Eaters* (April 1885), made when he was still living in the Netherlands, Van Gogh highlighted in a letter to his brother Theo (30 April 1885) the emphasis he gave to the figures' hands. In fact, they are crucial factors of the centripetal dynamism of the picture.¹⁰⁰ Thus, Van Gogh praised the manual labour of the peasants and the fact that they therefore earned an *honest* living, as he said.

definite and clearly defined background. Starting from this background the painter now works toward the front by a sort of scheme of forms in which each object's position is clearly indicated, both in relation to the definite background and to other objects'. See Kahnweiler 1949, p. 11, apud Rubin 1977, note 111 on p. 199. For Braque's view on the same issue, see Lassaigue 1973, p. 4, apud Karmel 1993, p. 37. See also Poggi 1989, p. 138.

99 See, for example, from Van Gogh: *Woman Sewing* (March – April 1885); *Woman Winding Yarn* (March 1885); *The Potato Eaters* (April 1885); *Head of a Woman* (March – April 1885); *Weaver* (1884). Note that with the exception of the latter, all pictures mentioned above, as well as the vast majority of those mentioned below (except the paintings in Boston and Dresden), were documented in Kendall ed. 1998.

100 For a foretaste of the new dynamic organisation implemented by Van Gogh when he

While living in the Netherlands, his commitment to the workers was expressed in a realist-leaning pictorial style, but with strong romantic emphasis and literary influences derived from Hugo and other writers of that period.¹⁰¹ Such a perspective, with idealistic aspects, was transformed and rapidly gained new features shortly following Van Gogh's move to France in 1886.

In the more industrialised, cosmopolitan, and dynamic context of France, Van Gogh came into direct contact with the works of Manet and of the impressionist and symbolist movements. His move had a major impact on his work, which became more up-to-date in light of the recent French experiences. Moreover, it was re-elaborated in terms that were very distinct from his previous period in the Netherlands. At the same time, the direction of his work's development was not as different from what he had done before, as many authors believed, especially those pursuing symbolist and formalist ideas.

The writers imbued with symbolist notions generally proposed an absolute break between Van Gogh's celebrated and prolific production in the four years (1886–1890) up to his untimely death, and that of his early works.

I intend to show here just the opposite: namely, that Van Gogh's mature work corresponded to a realist synthesis between aspects of his earlier works, made in the Netherlands, and elements of his new situation. Furthermore, this process was developed precisely around a radical analysis of painting, indissociable from a more critical and effective understanding of social issues and of the concept of labour.

Pathos and Redemption

The character of Van Gogh's early production was sentimental and marked by compassion. It united dramatic luminosity and the pathos of identification that dictated his choice of subjects.

In Van Gogh's paintings and drawings, the pictured scenes, in themselves eloquent reflections on the daily sacrifices of the workers, were converted

re-founded painting later – being based no longer on mental perspective, but on the pivotal role of the body – we may compare the circular dynamism that characterises the structure of this canvas with the monumental circular immobility of *The Brera Madonna/ The Pala di Brera/ The Montefeltro Altarpiece/ Brera Altarpiece* (*La Vergine con il Bambino e Santi*, c. 1472/5) by Piero della Francesca, achieved through a geometric structure that prompted the observer, thus positioned, to a contemplative attitude.

101 Van Gogh read Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables* (1862) in the 1870s and reread the book in 1883. See Clark 1989b, note 4 on p. 273.

into images of grave dignity. They gave human suffering a sense of austere redemption in pictorial terms – a redemption much more self-organised and aesthetically elaborated than the pious and resigned sentimentality of Millet, one of Van Gogh's early models.

His dense colours evoked the excessive effort, the weight of matter and the possibility of redemption, still distant and refracted by thick and hard adversity. Such a view was organically romantic. The language demonstrated unity and involved vehemence. Its rhythm was conducted by pain and by the spirit of compassion that guided the movements of the brush. Colours were interspersed with sombre tones in allusion to scarcity.

From the Periphery to the Centre

On the other hand, the impact of Van Gogh's contact with impressionist-symbolist painting in France became immediately evident in the change of motifs, as well as the radically renewed palette, which are clearly visible in several canvasses painted in 1887.¹⁰²

In the earlier works, the spatiality and volumes arranged in compact forms, according to realist tradition, were situated in a short depth of field, constructed through the use of chiaroscuro. But later these gave way to a representation practically in close-up, by means of a spatiality that was organised in chromatic terms. Shallow or almost deprived of depth, those paintings were segmented into horizontalised strips that enhanced, in their chromatic contrasts, pictorial discontinuity.¹⁰³

102 See, for example, from Van Gogh: *Self-Portrait with Felt Hat* (1887); *Mother by a Cradle, Portrait of Leonie Rose Davy-Charbuy* (March – April 1887); *Boulevard de Clichy* (1887); *The Seine with the Pont de la Grande Jatte* (Summer 1887); *Banks of the Seine* (April – June 1887); *Restaurant at Asnières/ Exterior of a Restaurant in Asnières* (Summer 1887); *Courting Couples in the Voyer d'Argenson Park in Asnières/ Garden with Courting Couples: Square Saint-Pierre* (Spring-Summer 1887); *Trees and Undergrowth* (Summer 1887); *A Park in Spring* (1887).

103 We may comparatively follow the development of the chromatic organisation of space in the pictures from 1887 onwards, mentioned in the previous footnote, to the following ones. In the latter pictures, the chromatic notation of volumes and space became increasingly incisive, as well as the pictorial organisation, according to horizontal compositional axes, signalling discontinuity. See from Van Gogh: *The Flowering Orchard* (Spring 1888); *Wheatfield* (June 1888); *The Harvest* (June 1888); *The Sea at Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer* (June 1888); *Fishing Boats on the Beach at Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer* (June 1888); *The Yellow House/ The Street* (September 1888); *Wheatfield with a Reaper* (July–September

If Van Gogh's paintings from the beginning of his French period were already distinct from those of impressionism – even if they were influenced by it – this was due to Van Gogh's rather intense brushwork. Yet this intensity was filtered through a restriction of manner, which constituted the new 'house rule'.

However, unlike the influence of the impressionist programme, the impact of Manet – who was much closer to Daumier than the impressionists – on Van Gogh was notable. At the same time, one could also see the repercussion of Van Gogh's contact with Seurat. This was most noticeable in the nearly antithetical contrast 'in the spirit and letter' with Van Gogh's earlier painting practised in the Netherlands. Moreover, the desire for exacerbated chromatic contrasts also distanced Van Gogh from the original core of impressionism, impelling him towards those who dissented from the movement: Seurat, Signac, Gauguin ...

From then on, Van Gogh would be defined by most of his interpreters as another member of the symbolist group. For some, this was enough to eradicate his previous identification with workers.

Thus, in an 1890 article, perhaps the first to daringly identify the value of Van Gogh's work, the young symbolist critic Albert Aurier, who would also write on Gauguin the following year,¹⁰⁴ called Van Gogh 'an isolated man'. As Shiff notes, Aurier referred to Van Gogh as 'an artist who had liberated himself from the material concerns of a Western civilization in desperate need of spiritual rejuvenation; Van Gogh's art had [thus] attained the intellectual and emotional purity of the Symbol'.¹⁰⁵

Aurier noted that by conceiving line and colour not as 'imitative' but as 'expressive' elements, and as 'techniques of symbolisation', Van Gogh had elaborated 'a kind of marvellous language destined to translate the Idea'.¹⁰⁶

The line of interpretation that dissociated Van Gogh from the issue of labour and emphasised his connection with symbolism continued with Roger Fry and Desmond MacCarthy in the text 'The Post-Impressionists'. This was written for the catalogue of an exhibition at the Grafton Galleries, London, in 1910.

The same position has also been presented in more recent analyses, such as John Rewald's in *Post-Impressionism from Van Gogh to Gauguin* (1962), and Sven Loevgren's in *The Genesis of Modernism* (1971), which seek to point out

1889); *Daubigny's Garden* (June 1890); *Houses at Auvers* (1890); *Landscape at Twilight* (June 1890); *Wheatfield with Crows* (July 1890).

104 See Aurier 1893a, p. 7, note 15 on p. 233.

105 See Shiff 1986, p. 162. See Aurier 1893b, in Aurier 1893c, pp. 262–263, apud Shiff 1986, p. 162, note 1 on p. 280.

106 See Aurier 1893b, p. 262, apud Shiff 1986, p. 7, note 23 on p. 234.

'the extent to which Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Seurat identified with the ideas of symbolist literary figures'.¹⁰⁷

Strength-Painting

However, as in the case of Cézanne, one can approach the mature work of Van Gogh from a perspective that differs from symbolism, finding in it a language that goes beyond converting matter into Idea, as Aurier intended.

In this sense, and according to the question raised at the outset concerning the disjunction between intellectual and physical labour, we will see that Van Gogh's oeuvre is parallel and complementary to Cézanne's work. Van Gogh developed aesthetic propositions that were associated with the goal of recovering and emancipating physical work. Such a question was present since the artist's youth, as we have seen.

Among the new aspects that emerged in Van Gogh's pictorial work when he arrived in France, intensifying from 1887 onwards, the dialogue between colour and sensation reached an unprecedented level compared with the work of his peers.

The sharp chromatic relations, without gradations and based on oppositions, were intensified. These relations began to interfere with the ocular work and established themselves in such contrasting terms, so that one could identify a second case to which could be applied the 'principle of violent opposition', conceived by Francastel in relation to Manet.¹⁰⁸

That was not the only factor in Van Gogh's work that became evident, however. The exacerbation of chromatic effects was not isolated; it went alongside the strengthening of impasto and utilisation of brushstrokes as a structural element of the composition, which unfolded and intensified the strategy, originated by Manet, of legitimising corporeal spontaneity as a principle of production.

From 1887–1888 onwards, in the mode of a material strategy, Van Gogh's brushstrokes bore large amounts of nearly undissolved paint. This indicated that he did not deal with ideas and meanings, or with the malleability of the hyperflexible materials generally used as conduits for thought – paint, canvas, paintbrush, etc. Instead he faced the opacity of solid masses, like a worker handling large amounts of raw materials.

107 See Shiff 1986, p. 159, notes 16–17 on p. 279. See Rewald 1962; Loevgren 1971.

108 See Francastel 1971, pp. 108–109.

Ax-Brush, Hoe-Brush, Rake-Brush, Firewood-Brush, Scythe-Brush

Two tools appear in Van Gogh's *The Flowering Orchard* (Spring 1888): a scythe and a rake by a tree. The rake's teeth, each made with a single brushstroke, raise parallels between the dragging motion and the effects of rake and paintbrush.

Similarly, in a painting Van Gogh made two years later, *Landscape at Twilight* (1890), showing a rural landscape in which a road crossed through cultivated fields, each brushstroke suggested weightiness, as if implying a physical act equivalent to the act of toiling the land or handling a shovel. In a correlated way, thick layers of opaque and solid paint had been applied on the canvas. Crammed together and with a roughness similar to a pile of wood – challenging the viewer to decipher the reason for all the excess – they resembled the contour lines of a steep and rugged slope ... What would be the reason for such an accumulation of materials on the canvas?

Amounts of pigment and paint, of contrasting colours and pulsating brightness – in portions almost weighable – refracted the received light – now not subsumed or veiled, but transformed into a force. Thus they were converted into a material effect of the painting, as if the canvas functioned like a machine prototype for the contemporary works of Argentine artist Julio Le Parc.

This process saw a materialist rearticulation of painting, a radical transformation of the notion of pictorial space, now turned into support. At the core, the strength of living labour confronted the tragedy, and evoked in its mimicry – like a new 'assault on heaven' – the titanic days of the Commune.

Labour-Painting

From an object of interest or favourite motif, inherited from and re-elaborated after the Dutch realist tradition, the corporeal strength of labour was converted by Van Gogh into a fundamental aesthetic principle. Although established at the height of the *'Belle Époque'* – the macabre result of social genocide – the painter regarded the act of working as the ability to give the rule to art¹⁰⁹ – and also to the world in general.

109 According to Kant, in '§ 46. Fine art is the art of genius' in the *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* (1790): 'Genius is the talent (natural endowment) which gives the rule to art. Since talent, as an innate productive faculty of the artist, belongs itself to nature, we may put it this way: Genius is the innate mental aptitude (*ingenium*) through which nature gives the rule to art' (Kant 1911, § 46). What I want to suggest is that, as an example of an historical *change*, Van Gogh's painting gives rise to a replacement of nature by labour as a paradigm for art.

This new level, the result of reciprocal determination in the aesthetic context of art and work, caused Van Gogh to reflect on the art and authorial subjectivity that came to include painting among other practices of transformation of matter through human effort.

Thus, in their vitality, Van Gogh's brushstrokes lost all resemblance to the impressionist *facture*, which was processed by means of small delicate touches on the canvas. Van Gogh's way of painting also abandoned the economy of the rigorous and intellectualist divisionism of Seurat, which had strongly interested him upon his arrival in France, particularly in some of his 1887 canvasses.¹¹⁰

In summary, the reformulation of the practice of painting implied a vigour that evoked manual labour. The brushstrokes struck with the physical fury of someone handling a hammer, axe or scythe, leaving grooves on the canvas. Especially from 1889 onwards, they appeared on one margin of the canvas to disappear on the other, as if turning the painting into a minor accident, in the face of the larger forces that seemed to occupy the canvas from the outside and uncontained by its shapes.¹¹¹

This new proposition of painting as a product of corporeal effort dissented from the impressionist pursuit of opticality, which was combined with the cosmetic handling of the paintbrush, according to the illusionist mode of retouching. Analogously, visual action, in Van Gogh's works, instead of being cleansed from other faculties, as intended by opticalism and the doctrine of 'pure visuality', presented itself synthetically combined with other practices of the body. Vision, detached from the mind and diverted from the power of abstract imagination, was realigned with the body; it was brought closer to the scale of the arm and stride.¹¹² The structure of the visual field, which was very large, tending towards infinity, in impressionism, was re-elaborated in the work of Van Gogh as a material and limited field.

110 See, for example, from Van Gogh: *Self-Portrait* (1886–1887); *Courting Couples in the Voyer d'Argenson Park in Asnières/ Garden with Courting Couples: Square Saint-Pierre* (Spring–Summer 1887); *Trees and Undergrowth* (Summer 1887); *A Park in Spring* (1887).

111 See, for example, from Van Gogh: *Quittenstilleben* (c. 1888); *The Sower* [after Millet] (1889); *A Pair of Leather Clogs* (Fall 1889); *Olive Grove* (June–July 1889); *Undergrowth* (June–July 1889); *Daubigny's Garden* (June 1890); *Ears of Wheat* (June 1890); *Landscape at Twilight* (June 1890); *Wheatfield with Crows* (July 1890).

112 Before Van Gogh, Manet had already followed that path by re-dimensioning depth and point of view for observation in his paintings. Also, according to a note from his friend Mallarmé about him, freely translated: 'I remember so well him saying, then: "The eye, a hand ...", which makes me ponder' (*'Souvenir, il disait, alors, si bien: "L'oeil, une main ..." que je resonge'*). Mallarmé 1976, p. 160.

In these terms, a significant and concrete step was taken towards the critical overcoming of the historically indeterminate notion of 'genius' – once attributed to nature, according to Shaftesbury, or to faculties of the transcendental subject, according to Kant. As a result, the tenor of a historical and social force could be attained.

The Living Foundation of Transformation

Thus, Van Gogh's brushstrokes did not just transform the tools of pictorial work or the very value of the physical body in painting; they also gained the whole, so to speak, mediating the affective and instinctual appropriation and the corresponding metamorphosis of things, reaching the trees, a wheat sprig, vegetables growing, the countenances and their affections; and also the currents of wind, the pulsation of the stars, the pace of the durations ...

In his late canvasses, the work of Van Gogh projects itself out of the sphere of the canvas and from the narrated scenes. The work appears as a transformative force with multiple powers, radiating throughout human actions and the cosmos, processing itself as if it were a Promethean power. In this way, living labour, in its metabolic or energetic origin evoked by Van Gogh, became materialised and multiplied as a factor of imagination and reflection.¹¹³

113 Argan explained the transition of Van Gogh's painting, from 'socially controversial' themes to a new stylistic level, not in terms of the replacement of socialist by symbolist ideas, as the formalist critics understood, but as a synthesis: 'In contact with the leading French movements, he [Van Gogh] understood that art should not be an instrument, but an agent for the transformation of society and ... of the experience of what man does in the world. Art should be part of general activism as an active force, but with an opposite sign: a scintillating discovery of truth against the growing tendency towards alienation and mystification. The technique of painting should also change, opposing the mechanic technique of the industry, as an ethical *making* of man against the *mechanical* making of the machine. It is no longer about superficially or profoundly representing the world: each of Van Gogh's signs is a gesture with which he faces reality to capture and appropriate its essential tenor, life. That life which the bourgeois society, with its alienating work, extinguishes in man'. See Argan 1981a, pp. 157–158. In another text, in which he formulates the analysis of Van Gogh's painting, also in light of the idea of non-alienated work, Argan observed: 'the colourful signs do not follow the contours or planes of the figure and object represented, but rhythms and cadences of a psychosomatic dynamism of the artist. His pictorial mode is not only the opposite of the mechanism of industrial labour, but also of the artisanal, projected and controlled operation'. See Argan 1983a, p. 387.

In this sense, Van Gogh's brush mimicked, metabolised, and transformed the corporeal forces, synthesising them with the things of the world. His brushwork therefore was constitutive of sensation revealed as labour power and translated into productive force.

The potential capacity for labour power to become a foundation for a new historical process of appropriation and transformation of the world was finally transmitted in the works made in 1889–1890, including even the adventitious forces of death, according to a letter to his brother. In this letter, commenting on his painting *Wheatfield with a Reaper* (1889), Van Gogh makes a curious remark about the reaper, who is pictured as a turquoise-green faceless figure, in the same opaque colour as the sky and amid a radiant golden-yellow field. This figure – whose features might be seen as an exuberant synthetic image of Van Gogh's painting – is said by the painter to be a figure allusive to death. Even if the claim is so, the fact is that Van Gogh transfigures death by means of many fearless brushstrokes.¹¹⁴

In one way or another, as a metaphor of life and death, encompassing all kinds of joyful or tragic transformations, Van Gogh's pictures revealed nature shaped by labour and presented it in terms opposed to the impressionists who were bound to the fetishistic scene of the bucolic landscape. Even the elements as yet untouched by human industry, like the sky, the planets and stars, were transformed in his pictorial work as products of labour.

In short, Van Gogh's initial empathy for proletarian life and his ethical valorisation of labour resulted in another regime of meaning. Thus, for the cubists of the next generation, the reciprocal determination between categories and practices, of painting and labour, would already be laid out as something explicit and as a model for current action. It could also be concluded that Tatlin's 'culture of materials', structured by the dynamic equilibrium of its components, also had its beginnings in Van Gogh. This was to be found precisely in its pathos and in the *new epic*, which recalls the 'heroism of modern life' evoked by Baudelaire in 1846.

114 'I see in him the image of death, in the sense that humanity might be the wheat he is reaping ... But there's nothing sad in this death, it goes its way in broad daylight with a sun flooding everywhere with a light of pure gold'. Van Gogh, 'Letter 604', in Van Gogh 1991, p. 202, apud, Kendall 1998, pp. 119–120.

Transition from Constructivism to Productivism, According to Tarabukin

Tarabukin, among Others

Who was Nikolai Tarabukin (1889–1954)? What makes him a good source and privileged participant in the debate about art in revolutionary Russia? Born in Moscow in 1889 and having studied philosophy, art history, and philology at the University of Moscow, Tarabukin participated in the original core of Russian Revolutionary constructivism, becoming one of the most active and inspiring members of the movement as a debater, art thinker, and writer of historiographical texts. From 1921 to 1924, Tarabukin was academic secretary at INKhUK, the Institute of Artistic Culture, Moscow, a state agency that operated from 1920–1924. The institute's debates and research – developed by the Working Group of Objective Analysis, in which the author took part – directly resulted in the constitution of the first Working Group of Constructivists in March 1921. Tarabukin also collaborated with OBMOKhU, the Society of Young Artists, an agit-prop group founded in 1919. It was born of the free art workshops that had emerged with the dissolution of the art schools and academies of the Tsarist *Ancien Régime*.

The OBMOKhU organised two exhibitions, in 1919 and 1920, which mainly presented posters and other graphic projects of agitation and propaganda, aiming at mobilisation for the civil war against the Whites. The third OBMOKhU exhibition, in May–June 1921, presented constructions and became a historical landmark of the constructivist movement. This third show included several works by Rodchenko. These works consisted of spatial constructions suspended from wires and developed Tatlin's *Corner* or *Angular Counter-relief* proposal of 1914–1915, made after his return from Paris where he had seen Braque's and Picasso's constructions and collages.

In sum, the constructivist platform was engendered by the activities of two research and debate centres, INKhUK and OBMOKhU, as well as other comparable institutions like VKhUTEMAS (Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops), which functioned as a school of architecture and design. It also developed out of discussions in several publications such as *LEF* (the journal of the left front of the arts).¹ Soon after, the transition to productivism emerged

1 For further details on the publication in its two phases, as *LEF* (Moscow, 1923–1925, edited by

from these same centres in the last quarter of 1921, proposing the new movement as a critical and materialist radicalisation of constructivism.

Tarabukin was an early constructivist who also helped to develop the movement. Thus, he is situated among other productivist theoreticians and writers, such as Osip Brik, Boris Arvatov, Boris Kushner, and Aleksei Gan. As such, the following comments about Tarabukin should not be taken to refer to a supposedly unique or singular author. Rather, they should be read as part of a collective and public debate. Equally, one must bear in mind that in addition to being a collective act, constructivism was an intrinsically interdisciplinary movement. Many members of the group started out painting and writing, but they also worked in other fields, such as graphic arts, architecture, etc.

Among the writings of the group, the specific relevance of Tarabukin's works – *From Easel to Machine* and *Toward a Theory of Painting*, both published in Russia in 1923 – is inseparable from the fact that some of his essays, translated into French, English, and Spanish, were central in introducing to the wider world the arguments of revolutionary constructivism. They contributed to constructivism's distinctiveness in comparison with other movements. Even today Tarabukin's writings provide a decisive point of view for the critical reinterpretation of certain constructivist artworks that became 'popular' in the West. Some works by Malevich, Tatlin, Rodchenko, Eisenstein, and Vertov had even been acquired by major capitalist museums; nevertheless, they were exhibited in an entirely de-contextualised way, thus raising varied historiographical absurdities which remain to this day.

Like many constructivists and productivists, Tarabukin fell into disgrace with the rise of Stalinism. He was not arrested like Gan, Kushner, Punin and many others. In his case the doors of publishing houses were closed to him from 1928 onwards, when his study on Bogaevskii was attacked as 'formalist'. The Russian Academy of Artistic Sciences (GAKhN) was also closed down that same year. After his time in INKhUK, Tarabukin had directed a department at the GAKhN from 1924 to 1928, dealing with cinema, theatre, and in particular the work of Eisenstein and Meyerkhof'd.

After that, Tarabukin lost all capacity to act publicly and subsequently took refuge amid a small circle of friends. From then on, there is only one reference to his work – by Aleksey Losev, in *The Dialectics of Myth* (1930).² Other works by Tarabukin were only edited posthumously, beginning in 1973. One of his most

B. Arvatov, O. Brik, B. Kushner, V. Mayakovskii, S. Tret'yakov, and N. Chuzhak) and *Novyi LEF* (Moscow, 1927–1928, edited by V. Mayakovskii and S. Tret'iakov), see Lodder 1990, p. 323.

2 Nakov 1980b, p. 19. See also Gough 2000.

important studies, *The Philosophy of Icon* (1916/35), was first published in 1999. In the preface to the 1972 French edition of Tarabukin's works, Nakov mentions *The Problem of Space in Painting* (1927), Tarabukin's 'greatest work', which would be edited by the group of semiotic researchers in Tartu, Estonia.

Nonsenses, Dissensions, Transition

Of the term constructivism and the related but distinct term productivism, the former is more familiar. Though corresponding to constructivism's second phase, the term productivism is not widespread in Western terminology. At present, people sometimes talk about utilitarian constructivism – as if this designation, like an additional predicate, corresponded to a secondary or minor fraction, which results in a historical incongruity. There are many widespread misconceptions in the West around the term 'constructivist', which will need to be clarified before any further consideration of the Russian revolutionary art movement, that is, the original constructivism as such.³

In Western contexts, when one mentions the term constructivism, it is often understood as a synonym for art styles based on abstraction and geometrisation. Thus, constructivism is currently confused with its Western counterparts of the same name: certain elements of the German Bauhaus, Dutch neoplasticism, the French group *Abstraction-Création* (Paris, 1931), the *Circle* manifesto (London, 1937), and the Ulm School of Design, Switzerland (*Hochschule für Gestaltung*, 1953). It is true that these movements have echoes of the original constructivism, with varying degrees of derivation. But strictly speaking, they have little to do with the principles and goals of revolutionary constructivism.⁴

3 The misconceptions around the diffusion of the term 'constructivism' are chronicled by Lodder 1990, pp. 1–5. Moreover, for an illustrative comment on the conflicting interests and ideologies around the term in the West, see Buchloh 1991, pp. 85–112. See also Albera 1990, pp. 118–143.

4 In a similar way, later on in Brazil, the term constructivism was attributed to the movements of geometrical abstraction originated in the 1950s under different denominations. For one example of the adopted and current use of the terms, see Amaral 1998. However, it should be noted that such a designation only dates back to the retrospective show in 1977, also organised by Aracy Amaral. Thus, it was not yet adopted or current at the time of the Concrete and Neo-Concrete movements, whose original manifestos date from 1952 and 1959, respectively. See Amaral 1977. It is possible that the source of this later tendency to refer to the Brazilian geometric movement was the typewritten manuscript of Ronaldo Brito, an essay dated 1975, which was widely read at the time, though only published ten years later. See Brito 1985.

This historical misunderstanding is due in part to Stalinist repression, as well as to the personal interest of some émigré artists. The latter, erasing their own traits and trajectories, introduced themselves in Western countries as authentic constructivists, although they opposed the main wing of constructivism, which radicalised its original ties with the left-wing trends of the revolutionary process by turning to productivism. These dissidents – which included the brothers N. Gabo and A. Pevsner – backed away before the advances of the Revolution in 1921–1922 (in pre-Stalinist times).

These self-exiled artists diverged from constructivism. In addition, there were others, like Vasili Kandinskii and Marc Chagall, who, while never considering themselves constructivists, did nothing to clarify matters during their time in the West as Russian émigrés. All of them contributed to the establishment of a counterfeit movement, capable of being attached to capitalism. In this imbroglio, we must not overlook the role of the Cold War, which reinforced the operation initiated by Stalinism, namely that of erasing the origins and directives of constructivism.⁵

October Fruit

The original constructivism, as well as the Proletkul't (see below) to which several of its members were linked, was one of the shoots of the October Revolution. As such, before getting to Tarabukin's thinking itself around the controversy between productivism and constructivism, it is necessary to delimit the terrain on which this debate occurred. More accurately, it is important to summarise the historical profile of constructivism, outlining its historical significance.

In fact, Aracy Amaral told me in an informal conversation in 2001 that the attribution first appeared in the material sent by MAM-RJ, to the 1977 exhibition at the Pinacoteca, in São Paulo. It should be noted, on the other hand, that in the typewritten text for a lecture by Hélio Oiticica, he referred to a 'characteristic constructive need of ours (see architecture, for example) and which everyday tends to become even more well-defined' (Oiticica 2011a, pp. 103–104). The diagnosis was consolidated in a text the following year, which constituted the main article of the booklet for the show *Nova Objetividade Brasileira*, Rio de Janeiro, Museu de Arte Moderna (6–30 April 1967). In it, Item 1 was called 'general constructive will' and began with the affirmation: 'In Brazil the innovative movements generally present this unique characteristic, in a very specific way, that is, a remarkable constructive will'. See Oiticica 2011b, pp. 87–101.

5 On the controversy around the constructivists, see Buchloh 1991; Lodder 1990. On the relations of constructivists and productivists with the Workers' Opposition, their criticism of the New Economic Policy (NEP) and dialogues with the Left Opposition, see Villela 2014.

ance in relation to earlier art forms and quickly running through its sources to the emergence of productivism, which led to the decisive split.

Three traits stood out as characteristic of original constructivism: *firstly*, the early and direct connection with the revolutionary movement of October 1917, fundamental to the constructivist design to change not only the arts, but also the entire social fabric; *secondly*, its internationalism or opposition to Slavism and to other regionalist cultural movements, whose weight profoundly and notoriously shaped the cultural tradition of Russia and of the regions under Russian rule; *thirdly*, the strong interaction between theory and practice and the related interdisciplinary ambition which led constructivism to go far beyond painting in its engagement in various fields of language: the construction-sculpture, agit-prop, graphic arts, architecture, design, photomontage, cinema, etc.

This interdisciplinary vocation led a significant number of constructivists to combine non-specialisation and radical aesthetic rigour, driving each one to act on multiple fronts: in teaching, in creative practice and in various spheres of language. Thus, for example, the poet Mayakovskii also worked on graphic arts, book editing, and poster design.

A New Regime: Practical and Theoretical

One cannot ignore the strong interaction between theory and practice in constructivism. It calls for lengthy consideration, given how essential it is to constructivism. In order to appreciate the historical magnitude of constructivism's new kind of association between theory and practice, a comparative historical parallel must be drawn. This is because the movement explicitly posed itself as the corollary of the historical process that marked the critical deconstruction of painting and the starting point for another art.

In other words, constructivism constituted a movement that must be considered not only with regard to its artistic achievements, but also according to its critical and reflective project, like a philosophical and political current. If this complex interaction between theory and practice distinguished constructivism from its derivatives and from practically all Western art movements, then this same quality had other effects too. It also established a certain antithetical correlation with the association between humanist artists and theorists that took place in Florence in the fifteenth century, engendering what would be called the pictorial system of the Renaissance.

The treatise *On Painting* (1436), by Leon Battista Alberti, can be regarded as the first milestone of the artistic process that the constructivists called 'easel

painting' and to which they intended to put an end. Tarabukin's desire to create a break from this practice saw him announce 'The Last Picture has been Painted', in 1921. The following year he wrote *From Easel to Machine*. The challenge was not simply an eccentricity of the author; many other constructivists also pointed to the '*death of painting*'.

When they alluded to the '*death of painting*', Tarabukin and others were not referring to the empirical disappearance of paintings and artists, or to the correlated demand. Rather, they invoked the loss of painting's historical and symbolic importance. The constructivist thesis was that having functioned for centuries as the main visual principle and paradigm, painting then appeared to be devoid of such value. Why?

Taken as an emblem, the '*death of painting*' referred to the possible extinction of the art system as a special activity based on craft, since Tarabukin and others used the term '*easel painting*' to include all other art forms, literature, theatre, music, etc. Thus, the '*death of art*' implied a change of regime. In the new situation, the dissolution of art into life raised the latter to a level comparable to art. This would be a central premise in the critical framework of the revolutionary debates about the new *byt* (everyday life).⁶

Thus, in a 1921 manifesto, 'the constructivists outlawed art and its priests' or, as noted by Malevich, 'the painter is a prejudice from the past, painting has perished'. Similarly, the former painter Rodchenko affirmed: 'Down with art, an escape from a senseless life! ... down with monasteries, institutions, studios, ateliers, work offices and islands'.⁷

This was a major crisis, implicated in the transformations brought about by industrialisation, and the debate became international. The '*death of art*' became a common desideratum, going beyond Russian borders. In the West, even earlier, the Cubists and Futurists, and shortly thereafter the Dadaists and Surrealists, claimed the *death of art-as-a-special-activity*. In the wake of October, however, the debate's negativity and radicalisation extended far beyond Western landmarks tethered to capitalism.

Synthesis and Overcoming of Bourgeois Art

What was at stake in the dispute? It is worth returning to the historical comparison between constructivism and the Italian *Quattrocento*. It is well-known that between the end of the *Duecento* and the beginning of the *Trecento*, Cavallini

⁶ See Trotsky 1973.

⁷ Apud Albera 1990, p. 126.

(active in 1273–1308), Cimabue (c. 1240–1302) and Giotto (c. 1267–1337) modernised mural painting or the so-called *fresco*. They borrowed from the humanist carving of Gothic sculpture to elaborate the first factors of a new pictorial rationality, at the time linked to the culture of artisans and guilds and to the emergence of the individual point of view. In parallel, retable paintings gained importance and autonomy in the face of architecture and provided another genre of paintings for the nascent bourgeois clientele.

During the early *Quattrocento*, following a period of strong social conflict in Florence,⁸ L.B. Alberti and F. Brunelleschi, patronised by the Medici bank, formulated an art theory which articulated geometry, rhetoric, and elements of Plotinian or Neoplatonic philosophy.⁹ In these terms, they reconceived the pictorial practice; no longer was it to have an empirical basis, but instead it would be one of the liberal arts. This formed the basis for the pictorial and aesthetic system, of bourgeois and metaphysical character, on which Western European painting was constructed for more than four centuries.

Conversely, the constructivists derived their origins from critical experiences in the West, with Manet, Cézanne, and cubism. With their links to radical republican opposition, these experiences helped to undermine the bases of the Renaissance system.¹⁰ After 1917 and the triumph of the October revolutionaries in the civil war against the Whites, constructivism emerged. It asserted itself as the corollary and synthesis of the proletarian revolution and of the critical radicalisation of Western painting. Thus it presented itself as the principle of a new critical and aesthetic system, which worked towards combining materialist artistic practice and aesthetic-political reflection in a new key, dialectically opposed to the previous one.

8 These included the uprising in the last quarter of the fourteenth century of the *Ciampi* (wool workers, until then excluded from the guilds), and finally, the oligarchic restoration through the consolidation of power of the Florentine financial system associated with the Vatican.

9 On the stonecutters' strike against the division of labour established by Brunelleschi's project, see Argan 1946.

10 'The entire artistic life of Europe throughout the last decades has developed under the sign of "the crisis of art". When Manet's canvasses first appeared about sixty years ago at Parisian exhibitions, then provoking a true revolution in the artistic world of Paris, painting lost the first stone of its foundation. And the whole subsequent development of pictorial forms, which until recently we were still inclined to see as an incessant process of improvement, nevertheless, in the light of most recent developments, we now perceive this, on the one hand, as an irreversible decomposition of the pictorial organism in regard to its constituent elements, and on the other, as the degeneration of painting as the typical art form' (Taraboukine 1980a, p. 33).

Through constructivism, a new field was produced: a system of non-representational art, philosophically founded on work rather than on representation or on the value derived from the circulation of goods.¹¹

Critique of Labour

Thus, despite the unwillingness of Lenin and Krupskaya to lend support, constructivism presented itself as a direct product and vector of the intensification of the October Revolution. Unlike its Western counterparts, constructivism was constituted from the questioning and restructuring of not only functional but also radical artistic practices with regard to their inclusion in economic and social relations. That is also why constructivism became undesirable in the face of the New Economic Policy (NEP), which led it to the opposition. Here resides the reason for the eradication of constructivism before the reorganisation of labour carried out by Stalinism, which in the name of the productive imperative consolidated the capitalist-Fordist model of alienated work based on the division of intellectual and manual labour.

In short, the aesthetic act, coupled with a critical, radical, dialectical, and Marxist perspective, implied the reciprocal determination of the moments of production and consumption, moments that in capitalism appear to be not only distinct but isolated.

There was a partial exception to this in this context, outside the USSR, where some artists intervened around the reception of their works (for example, some dadaists and Marcel Duchamp). In constructivism, however, the integration of theory and practice was a matter of principle.

Therefore, in order to clarify the contrast between the principles of revolutionary constructivism and those of its Western counterparts, the distinction must be linked to a fundamental rejection of the fetishism inherent in contemplation. So, instead of arguing for geometry as a model, the turning point, in the revolutionary case, was the consideration of reciprocal determination between the *function*, *form*, and structure of the work, directly affecting the *treatment of the materials* or the *production process*. In short, the work's configuration occurred through the notion of *estrangement*, developed by Viktor Shklovskii, and was conditioned by the ethical and political task of reconstructing everyday life in combination with the revolutionary process.

11 On productivism as the completion of a revolutionary historical development, see Taraboukine 1980m, pp. 70–74.

At the time, Germany functioned as the main sounding board for Russian debates, relaying them to the rest of Europe. Some of the constructivist principles and procedures were assimilated and disseminated by Brecht, Benjamin, Piscator, Heartfield, and Hannes Meyer, among others.

From Process Painting to the New Realism

In order to uncover the previous markers of constructivism in Tarabukin's formulations, one must closely focus on the work of Cézanne.

Why was Cézanne considered one of the decisive sources of constructivism? 'Because', according to Tarabukin, 'after Cézanne, painters began to concentrate their full attention on the effective material structure of the canvas, that is, on colour, texture, construction and on the material itself'.¹² Such a structure can be understood, in this case, as the disposition related to the specific materials, that is, texture, colour, brushstrokes, and their organisation.¹³

In effect, with Cézanne's work the structure of painting obtained full prominence, standing out before the semantic-representational dimension, explicitly positioning itself as a focus of inescapable attention for the observer.

It is a well-known fact that in the early 1870s, Cézanne began to paint alongside his friend Pissarro and, through the influence of the latter, to adopt plein air painting and light colours. However, without dwelling on the procedures of impressionism in general, Cézanne elaborated a mode marked by the explicit use of modular brushstrokes, applied in small blocks or series. He also developed an organisation of the pictorial fabric, marked by intermittences not only in the direction of brushstrokes – as the series or blocks were arranged increasingly along divergent vectors – but also in discontinuities and lacunae in the modelling and fields of colour. On several occasions, in addition to the fraying of compositional elements, the very occupancy of the canvas, that is, the elementary treatment given to the support, appeared as discontinuous: unpainted portions let the canvas emerge into view.

Why is that so? Many observers were astonished by Cézanne's way of painting. Critics and artists J.F. Schnerb¹⁴ and R.P. Rivière, as well as Émile Bernard reported that Cézanne started his paintings without any planned scheme or

¹² See Taraboukine 1980b, p. 34.

¹³ See Taraboukine 1980e, p. 44.

¹⁴ For Schnerb and Rivière's article on their visit to Cézanne in January 1905, see Rivière and Schnerb 1907, in Doran 1978, pp. 85–91. Unlike Schnerb, further details about Rivière remain unknown.

composition. He thus developed his painting by successively covering adjacent areas, as if step-by-step, without jumping from one part of the canvas to the next, which was the usual procedure at the time. By doing so, his main concern, which he regarded as a sign of authenticity and sincerity in the work process, was to never make corrections.¹⁵

The well-known result consisted of asymmetries and deformations, which became typical of the painting of Cézanne, as did his insistence on representing recurrent motifs and objects as if they were never exhausted or effectively concluded.

For those like the symbolists M. Denis and Bernard, and their formalist surrogates, who aspired to the geometrisation and updating of the classical order in the face of impressionism's subjectivist standpoint, Cézanne's processual dialectics and permanently unfinished mode appeared perplexing and paradoxical. What did he intend?

Today we can clearly see what Cézanne was aiming at. But at the time his work astonished even those closest to him and his pseudo-followers, like the symbolists. Cézanne avoided superimposing the hegemony of compositional values, its logic and combinations, over the practice and physical treatment of the pictorial material.

Thus was established what the constructivists termed processual art, in which the artistic practice was laid bare instead of fetishising the precious result. In short, processual art revealed as if in an algebraic demonstration the truth of its fabrication, materials and connections, prioritising them over the referential function of representing either forms of nature or those referring to subjectivity. Thereby, radicalising the Cézannian turning point paved the way for revolutionary constructivism. This involved the recognition of Cézanne's material and political achievement; after the Commune massacre of 1871 and facing the social war of the so-called *Belle Époque*, he began to grant sovereignty to the work rather than to form or the resulting commodity.¹⁶

Therefore, it was the radicalisation of the processual dimension of art that occurred in the *analytical* cycle or in the *non-utilitarian* object cycle, from 1919 to 1921. This was a cycle that the constructivists called the 'laboratory phase',

¹⁵ See Shiff 1986, p. 116.

¹⁶ On the symbolist mythology created around Cézanne, see, for example, Denis 1912b, pp. 251, 246, apud Shiff 1986, p. 132. See also Bernard 1910, pp. 138–139, apud Shiff 1986, p. 132. For a more detailed account of such affirmations summarised by Shiff, some from letters and others from articles, see Shiff 1986, notes 37–41 on p. 271. For a recent investigation of an illustrative episode in the social war of the period, see Bianchi 2014.

conceived 'in view of the future production'.¹⁷ At that point two key notions were consolidated: first, the notion of *object* – operative in Russian debates since 1915, in opposition to the notion of *artwork*; and second, the notion of *non-objective art* – employed by Malevich and the constructivists in response to Kandinskii. Non-objective art must not be confused with Kandinskii's notion of *abstract art*, because the suprematist and constructivist conceptions were intended to be anti-metaphysical, materialistic, and concrete. In short, borrowing the formulation of this distinction from Shklovskii: 'artworks are no longer windows to another world, but objects'.¹⁸

In sum, this threshold saw the overcoming of the representational dimension of art and the postulation of an object with value in itself, whose nexuses were inherent to it and not to some external instance. Malevich called this a *new pictorial realism*. Thus was forged a new notion of realism, entirely distinct from the naïve notion derived from naturalism.

As Tarabukin put it: 'the artist constitutes in the forms of his art his own reality and conceives realism as awareness of the genuine object, autonomous with respect to its form and content'.¹⁹

In the Face of the 'Last Picture'

Such was the basis for the debate launched by Tarabukin. The constructivist discussion developed from this point towards two issues that were decisive for the productivist transition: radicalisation of the intrinsic opposition between the ideas of *composition* and *construction*; and the utilitarian character of the objects or of the constructivist idea of *construction*.

Tarabukin's aforementioned presentation at INKhUK, entitled 'The last picture has been painted', dates from 20 August 1921 – a few days before the opening of the show $5 \times 5 = 25$ – where Rodchenko presented three paintings, *Pure Red Colour*, *Pure Blue Colour*, and *Pure Yellow Colour*. For Tarabukin, his communication signalled the climax of analytical constructivism, as well as its imminent overcoming.

Here one must turn to the words of Tarabukin's paper itself, because the comments on one of the paintings demonstrate the passion with which the participants claimed a new course for constructivism. Tarabukin said of what he then called the 'last picture':

¹⁷ Nakov 1980a, p. 29.

¹⁸ Shklovskii 1923, apud Nakov 1980c, p. 12.

¹⁹ Taraboukine 1980c, p. 36.

[A] smallish, almost square canvas painted entirely in a single red colour. This canvas is extremely significant of the evolution of artistic forms over the last ten years. It is not merely a stage which could be followed by new ones but the last and final step of a long path, the last word, after which painting will have to keep silent, the last 'picture' executed by a painter. This canvas eloquently demonstrates that painting as an art of representation – which it has always been until now – has arrived at the end of the road. If Malevich's *Black Square on a White Background*, despite the poverty of its artistic meaning, did contain some pictorial idea which the author called 'economy', 'the fifth dimension',²⁰ in contrast, Rodchenko's canvas is devoid of any content: it is a blind, stupid, and voiceless wall.²¹ However, as a link in a chain of historical development, this canvas is 'epoch-making', if one considers it not as a value in itself (which it isn't) but as a stage in a chain of evolution.²²

In November of the same year, 1921 – a year of many divisions in the revolutionary process – Rodchenko, his partner Varvara Stepanova, and other constructivists declared their renunciation of '*easel art*'. They proclaimed that this visual language had perished, and they would devote themselves to the production of objects with a utilitarian character, and strengthened their commitment to the revolutionary process.

As a result, a secession occurred in the constructivist group. The INKhUK group adhered to the productivist theses, while the dissenters followed in the footsteps of Kandinskii – who had already left the institute earlier that year – and sought self-imposed exile abroad, like the brothers Gabo and Pevsner who had long maintained many contacts with the West.²³ We should stress that even though both groups repeatedly referred to the mechanical and geometrical forms as elements of a new art, the exiles never abandoned the conceptions of *composition* and art as *contemplation*.

Within this historical framework, Tarabukin's text, *From Easel to Machine*, which came out in 1923 among Proletkul't²⁴ publications, constituted a cent-

20 See Malevich's brochures 'The New Systems in Art', 'From Cézanne to Suprematism', etc. (Tarabukin's note).

21 'I regard this canvas as an easel work, and I refuse to see in it a "model" of decorative mural painting' (Tarabukin's note).

22 See Taraboukine 1980d, pp. 41–42.

23 See Buchloh 1991.

24 Founded on 16–19 October 1917, in Petrograd, by Bogdanov, Lunacharsky, and Gorky, as a cultural organisation of workers, but which claimed full autonomy before the government

ral weapon in the debates, marking a turning point in the movement. In this second phase, those who laid claim to the constructivist path and called themselves *leftist artists* then proposed the utilitarianism and dissolution of the object. A new reflective and practical level was proclaimed for constructivism: the productivist programme.

Meanwhile, a conservative reaction was already underway, which would later gain full breadth and power under Stalinism. In 1921, a new association of painters was formed, the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR). Its aim was to defend 'realist and representative' painting, according to the values of so-called 'heroic realism' (sic).²⁵ In its annual exhibition of 1922, AKhRR called for a fight against the 'productivists' speculative art'.

Construction against Composition

What were the criteria and premises of the discussion proposed by Tarabukin within the constructivist group? Basically, the traditional notion of *composition* referred to passive contemplation, while *construction*, according to constructivism, translated into a mode of action by means of the materials. In regard to such dynamics, that countered contemplative passivity, Tatlin presented his well-known definition of form, in materialist terms, as a 'product of the dynamic force resulting from material relations'.²⁶

In order to oppose *composition* and *construction*, Tarabukin argued that the former was concerned with the moment of representation and therefore comprised illusory elements in the painting, such as volumetric effects of depth, time or rhythm, luminosity or colour, etc.

Construction, in turn, was elaborated exclusively through the organisation of material and real elements, namely, texture, colour, mass and brushstrokes, or through the technical treatment given to the materials. Hence there emerged a feeling of enhanced authenticity – a passage from the flat surface of the

and the Bolshevik party, the Proletkul't (the proletarian culture movement) was seen by the government and by the Bolshevik party as the embryo of a rival party, according to an article in *Pravda*, n. 270, 1 December 1920. It was therefore annexed to the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros), under the direction of Lunacharsky. See Lodder 1990, p. 75 and note 9 on p. 278. On the following relations between INKhUK and Proletkul't, and its reorganisation according to the productivist programme, see Lodder 1990, p. 93.

25 See Nakov 1980c, p. 16; see also Lodder 1990, pp. 184–185.

26 See Gray 1968, pp. 239–241, apud Albera 1990, p. 174.

painting to the real 3-dimensional space – when Tatlin and the members of OBMOKhU began to deal with real materials, such as iron, glass, and wood.

Even more than Tatlin's *Corner Counter-reliefs* – which required a unique point of view, as stressed by Tarabukin – it was, therefore, his central counter-reliefs and the spatial-constructivist works of the third OBMOKhU exhibition – which included also some of Rodchenko's hanging constructions – that fully demonstrated and enhanced the notion of *construction* in their interaction with the real space.

In short, while *composition* comprised illusionist operations, *construction* dealt only with the materials, that is, with the real and concrete elements of painting. From this concern with materials the constructivists draw the urgent need to overcome *composition* as a pure aesthetic principle linked to two-dimensionality and to the historical tradition of representation. In contrast, constructivists emphasised the truth of the *construction*, by way of the organisation of material and real elements, emancipated from the illusionism of representation.

After the Death of Art

On the basis of this argument for a higher stage of authenticity and truth, one can understand Tarabukin's enthusiasm for Osip Brik's report presented at the Institute of Artistic Culture on 24 November 1921. This report was also endorsed by 25 constructivist-productivist artists. The document advocated the transference of the Institute, INKhUK, which belonged to the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros), to the Supreme Council of National Economy. On this occasion, Tarabukin stressed the new conception of art as a productive activity meant it should be reallocated to an economic office:

However, the death of painting, the death of easel art does not mean by itself the death of art in general. Art continues to live not as an established form but as a creative substance. Moreover: now that its typical forms are buried and we have attended the funeral in the course of the preceding presentation, art sees before itself horizons of an exceptional amplitude.²⁷

27 See Taraboukine 1980h, p. 49; see also Taraboukine 1980m, p. 72.

The first issue of the *LEF* journal, in 1923, echoed a similar demand, proposing new functions for art through Mayakovskii's proclamation: 'constructivism must become the superior form of "engineering" of whole life forms'.²⁸

Consequently, these artists, now engaged in fields in which they were previously barred, took on the task of revolutionising perception and the consciousness of the majority. For this reason, productivist artists abandoned the studios in order to act and intervene in the factories.

In this respect, Tarabukin's intervention sought to reflexively radicalise the debate. The focus of his criticism targeted his constructivist peers who were still dedicated to 'analytical art':

Studio painting or sculpture – whether its representativeness is naturalistic ... allegorical and symbolical ... or even if it acquires a non-objective character as in the majority of contemporary young Russian artists –, it is always museum art, and the museum remains a form-creating element (which dictates the form), and at the same time the cause and the aim of the creation. I also include spatial painting and the counter-reliefs [by Tatlin] in the category of museum objects which have no vital or practical purpose. All that was created by the 'left' wing of contemporary art will not find its justification but on museum walls, and all the revolutionary storm will find its appeasement in the silence of such graveyard.²⁹

Questioning the position of 'non-objective' art, nourished by formalism, suprematism, as well as early constructivism, Tarabukin proclaimed the following in favour of the productivist development: 'Today's world presents to the artist completely new demands: it expects from him not museum "pictures" and "sculptures", but socially justified objects in form and purpose'.³⁰

Tarabukin's criticism did not stop there. It also went against attitudes that were only apparently productivist, like those of Malevich and Tatlin. The painter had opted for the application of suprematist forms on porcelain, designing teapots and tea sets; while the sculptor, after disowning his 'useless counter-reliefs' (his own words) had opted for the design of objects, such as 'useful casseroles'.

28 See Mayakovskii 1923, apud Kopp 1975, p. 190, apud Albera 1990, p. 123.

29 See Taraboukine 1980f, p. 47.

30 See Taraboukine 1980g, p. 48.

However, Tarabukin judged such attitudes as naïve, for they tried to transpose the studio attitude to the factory, that is, as a specific concern with the production of special objects.³¹

The Labour Issue

What were the new art forms that, for Tarabukin, carried 'horizons of an exceptional amplitude', glimpsed after the 'death of easel art'?³²

Tarabukin referred to them by the Russian term *mastersvo* and qualified this attitude with the adjective 'productivist'. The English translation became 'production skill'; the French term, in turn, transformed this into 'maîtrise productiviste', something similar to 'mastery, sovereignty, dominion or productivist power' ...

What exactly did Tarabukin attribute to this notion? Why and how should art endure, even after the death of the artisanal or *easel* modes? In any case, in these terms he demonstrated the purpose of conceptualising art as a practice that was independent of any given situation, past or present:

The problem of productivist mastery cannot be solved through a superficial connection between art and production, but only through their *organic relationship*, through the connection of the work *process* itself with the creation. Art is an activity which supposes, in the first place, mastery and ability. Mastery is by nature immanent to art. Neither ideology, which can take on very different aspects, nor form itself or the material, which vary infinitely, allow us to concretely designate art as a *sui generis* creative category. The revealing mark of the essence of art resides only in the very work process, a process which tends towards greater perfection in execution. Art is the most perfected activity applied to the shaping of the material.³³

In these terms, art appears as a superior mode of work, which can possibly be translated as non-alienated or emancipated labour. Tarabukin's redefinition of the meaning of art as a work mode is explained below:

³¹ See Taraboukine 1980k, p. 63.

³² See Taraboukine 1980h, pp. 49–50.

³³ See Taraboukine 1980i, p. 53.

By cultivating the idea of mastery in every genre of activity, we contribute to bring art and labour closer. The notion of artist becomes a synonym of the notion of master. By going through the melting pot of creation, which endows it with a tendency towards perfection, the labourer's hard and subordinated work turns into mastery, art. This means that every man who works, whatever his form of activity – material or purely intellectual – ceases, from the moment in which it is animated by the will to work to perfection, to be a worker-craftsman to become instead a master-creator. For the master who is an artist in his field, there is no trivial or mechanical work: his activity is creative and artistic. Such work is devoid of the demeaning and destructive aspects which characterise subordinate work. The organic connection between work and freedom, the creation and mastery inherent to art, can be realised through the integration of art into work. By linking art to work, work to production, and production to life, to daily existence, an extremely difficult social problem is solved at one stroke.³⁴

However, once Tarabukin denied the merely artistic use of knowledge in production – as Malevich and Tatlin undertook the manufacture of special products – one could ask: how to carry out such a revolutionary purpose, either factually or symbolically?

For Tarabukin, the point was not to modify products, perfecting their excellence, as the Bauhaus would do, within capitalism. Rather, the aim was to transform the labour process and thereby directly imply changes in labour relations and in the worker. In this regard, Tarabukin affirmed:

Art thus understood is really able to change life, because it transforms labour, the basis of our life, turning it into mastery, creation and joy. The art of the future will not be a special commodity, but *transformed work*.³⁵

Elephants and Butterflies

It is worth restating the key question: how will such a programme be carried out through artistic strategies? As Tarabukin stressed, the disappearance of the value of the object in general as a direct consequence of serial production

34 See Taraboukine 1980j, p. 54.

35 See Taraboukine 1980j, p. 56.

should be immediately recognised. Thus, the artist who is attentive to industrial production processes should note that ‘the participation of many factories is necessary to the fabrication of any product. Therefore, the object loses all individuality in the production process’. As a result:

Many current products no longer present themselves as objects, but as complexes of objects indissolubly linked in the process of consumption and forming a system, or rather no longer even represent a materialised work. Hence, for example, the utilisation of electrical energy, a complex system of installations that provides ‘facilities’ in the form of light, heat, driving force, etc. We came to a new concept, the one of ‘installation’,³⁶ unknown in the conditions of a less developed material culture.³⁷ In short, serial production erases the boundaries of the notion of object by leading towards an extreme reduction of the object’s exploitation time, often using it only once. The object loses its *raison d’être* and is no longer conceived for an important time of utilisation to become a thing consumed at once, thus, instead of an *elephant*, it is only an ephemeral *butterfly*.³⁸

We should not end with this perspicacious and potentially confusing observation. Despite its apparent topicality – which could give the impression that the productivist programme would have been implemented in the arts regardless of political, economic, and ethical circumstances – it is important to precisely situate and combine it with Alexei Gan’s explanation of revolutionary constructivism. Gan’s *Constructivism* (1922) is contemporary to Tarabukin’s argument. According to Gan:

Constructivism is not only our phenomenon.

It develops from living conditions which arise from the condition of the productive forces.

36 Andrei Nakov adopts ‘*appareillage*’ in the French version. Maria Gough, in her English translation, adopts the term *installation*, corresponding to the Russian term ‘*ustanovok*’. See Gough 2000, p. 105. I will opt for the latter to translate Tarabukin’s words in the following footnote.

37 ‘The notion of “installation” and the idea of dematerialisation of contemporary culture were spread by Kushner in a series of conferences at the Institute of Artistic Culture, and at public conferences to which I refer’ (Tarabukin’s note).

38 See Taraboukine 1980, p. 65.

And depending on the conditions of the productive forces, i.e. depending on the different social forms, it adopts different inclinations.

The social and political structure of the R.S.F.S.R. and the structure of capitalist Europe and America are completely different.

Naturally, Constructivism is not the same.

Our Constructivism has declared uncompromising war on art, because the means and properties of art are not powerful enough to systematise the feelings of the revolutionary milieu. It is cemented by the real success of the Revolution and its feelings are expressed by intellectual and material production.

In the West Constructivism fraternises with art ...

Our Constructivism has set itself a clear aim: to find the communist expression of material structures.

In the West, Constructivism flirts with politics, declaring that the new art is outside of politics, but that it is not apolitical.

Our Constructivism is aggressive and uncompromising: it wages a severe battle with parasites, with left and right painters, in a word with all, who even slightly defend the speculative aesthetic activity of art.

Our Constructivism is fighting for the intellectual and material production of a communist culture.³⁹

39 See Gan 1922, p. 70, apud Lodder 1990, p. 238.

Argan Seminar: Art, Value and Work

A Division

What constitutes art history? Is it a realm of virtuosity, of rare and precious goods? Or does it investigate the historical modes of value production, which also reflects on human work, politics, and the city?

This opposition was posed by Giulio Carlo Argan at the beginning of the text 'Art History' (1969),¹ an eminently theoretical essay in which he critically reviewed the main currents of art historiography. He dedicated the essay to two distinguished scholars, Lionello Venturi and Erwin Panofsky – both spirits of the *Aufklärung* in the field – whom he venerated, but against whose works he marked a boundary.

This distinction – summarised at the outset – guided the entire work of Argan, as a materialist historian and dialectical thinker of the experience of art not as mere expression of *pathos*, but as a historical and philosophical mode of judgement and totalisation. As such, for Argan, art is in a constant critical dialogue with other modes of activity and is able to outline projects about the future.

I will start from this distinction, since today it remains valid as a general high-water mark in research in art and architecture, another field within which Argan's work has developed. Given architecture's intrinsically heterogeneous nature, combining aesthetic and urban issues – and therefore political, technical, and socio-economic aspects too – it certainly contributed to Argan's thoughts on art, allowing them to unfold in a permanent dialectical relation to the city.

Considering that modern artworks participate in the general process of circulation and have value, Argan proposed a distinction as to how to deal with art. One may deal with the value, for example, by classifying it, qualifying it, etc., or one may inquire into and reflect on the value, questioning its historical condition, constitution, physiology, etc.

From this distinction it is possible to divide the lineages of the historiography of art into two broad currents, according to the interests involved. One is a current that is well rooted in tradition, and that always enjoys great

1 Argan 1984b, p. 19.

institutional power, focused on the already crystallised external form of an *a posteriori* value. That is, it is directed toward the art object already considered as such and therefore assumed to be intrinsically distinct from other objects, which are understood as mere objects of use (utensils) and therefore lacking inherent value

In historical terms, such a distinction between utensils and artworks – that is, between ordinary objects and those with value in themselves – derives from what once distinguished the religious sphere from other domains in the Western tradition. On the basis of this choice over the nature of art as given and indifferent to the conditions of value constitution, the major current in art history seeks to identify and classify the value of the object in question. It also establishes the general conditions for aesthetic reception, conservation and circulation of the object, consistent with the aforementioned value. The many modalities of formalism in art history share this basic scheme.

The second mode or regime for understanding art – with which Argan is aligned – positions art among other historical processes of value production. Thus, if classical economic theory first took labour as a substance of value, and others such as Hegel and Marx reworked the theme, Argan analogously placed art among other forms of value production. In this perspective, art is seen as a paradigmatic mode of work. In this way, Argan was able to ‘combine the artistic question with the investigations linked to the dynamics of production and economy, without risk of reductionism’.²

With art included in the wider historical field, this approach always entails confronting the variation of social forms and work modes, as well as the regimes of appropriation and wealth accumulation that constitute such formations and that position art as a precise historical formation. Lest we get ahead of ourselves, let us deduce the historical horizon implied in such an approach at a later stage.

Labour Regimes

Among the problems inherent in this perspective are productive structures, that is, specific historical formations with their own power to mould and influence practices, without prejudice to other possible determinations. One must consider both these structures and their negations. That is, we must attend to the crucial transitions of symbolic regimes that evidence transformations or

2 Naves 1993, p. XIX.

breaks in the productive structures and which sometimes occur in the course of a generation, radically affecting the functions of art. Let us think, for example, of the paradigmatic case of Jacques-Louis David, successively a painter of the Royal Academy, an artist of the Revolution, and later Thermidorian, and then a key man of Bonapartism, who was also exiled shortly thereafter. How should we situate him according to a single device of artistic authorship before these modifications that decisively changed not only political regimes, but also the function of art? In short, historical formations and the authorship functions inherent to them are factors of a complex of multiple determinations, from which will be extracted a specific synthesis in the form of the artistic object or practice in question.

For example, in relation to Ancient Greece it is possible to delimit, as early as the so-called 'archaic' period that precedes the 'classical', a first field of reference in which statues, ceramics, mosaics, and buildings were generally produced by slaves or craftsmen in a position of serfdom. It should be borne in mind that this periodisation, associated with the status of labour, cannot be indiscriminately applied to the other arts in which the question of physical effort did not apply (for example, the arts of speech, such as poetry or rhetoric). The distinction between the arts determined according to the required physical effort can go unnoticed today, but it certainly mattered when regarding slavery or serfdom, and labour was either seen as a source of value or not even considered.³

This consideration does not eliminate other historical issues regarding form, technique, or material proprieties. The tectonic or constructive issues – for example, of a pyramid, either its construction by slaves, through free or another kind of labour – linger and obviously need to be tackled on another level. However, the production of visual objects, associated with coercion, raises its own questions with regard to the internal nexus of the artistic form and of the social value of the object and places, situating them in a historical field that is very distinct from ours – in which the criteria of freedom and autonomy have become fundamental for modern art objects; see, for example, Kant's opposition between *art* as 'production through freedom' and 'workmanship', whereby the latter is successively qualified as 'paid', 'unpleasant (laborious)' production, and liable to being 'coercively imposed'.⁴

3 On the distinction, fundamental in Ancient Greece, between the man who *acted* and the man who *manufactured*, and the correlative inexistence of a word corresponding to 'labour', see Vernant 2002b, pp. 325–348, and 2002a, pp. 349–356.

4 Kant 1911.

In view of this landmark related to labour and value regimes, it can be said that the historical field of unfree art production, to a greater or lesser extent, covers all of Antiquity, before and after the classical period in Greece, as well as imperial Roman art, and extends to large parts of the pre-bourgeois Christian era, dominated by fiefdoms.

In this regard, a second field can be delimited. Here, the practice of the visual arts was entrusted – by contract or other forms of commission or acquisition – to the free-wage or similarly paid worker, first connected to guilds and later disciplined by the academies, widespread during the course of mercantilist capitalism. This type of artisan occupied another kind of social position. He was part of a process already dictated by economic expansion. At the core of this development, he would come to be recognised in similar ways to those in the liberal professionals. Enjoying a position to some extent enviable in terms of the social division of labour, as a qualified craftsman or even a liberal professional with a degree of theoretical mastery over his trade, such a master often had other workers under his command. Since Gothic art in the end of the medieval period, the master craftsman also occasionally enjoyed the power to individualise his own production, which allowed him certain discursive licenses and the prerogative of signing his works.

Of course, art history, since G. Vasari's *Le Vite de' Più Eccellenti Architetti, Pittori, et Scultori Italiani* (1550/8) – which can be taken as the first cartography of the subject displaying some systemic ambition – is replete with peculiarities. To that end, the distinctions proposed here must be understood, not as absolutes, but as mere prisms or regulatory frameworks. Nonetheless, we can say that a growing recognition of the liberal character of visual practices progressively developed in Europe after the expansion of the medieval boroughs, from around the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, according to the region. This process reached a certain paradigmatic limit in the last decades of the eighteenth century in absolutist France. In the latter, the professional artist had the right to aspire to become 'King's painter', accumulate functions and responsibilities, such as placing orders before his peers for official buildings, and also exercise pedagogical and normative functions as a member of the Academy. However, if the 'King's painter' had privileges, such as the right to set up his studio in the Louvre palace, he did not enjoy 'autonomy'.

In fact, against the modern criteria historically and socially established with the French Revolution,⁵ the artist of the Ancien Régime was denied freedom

5 After decreeing in 1791 the end of the control by the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture over the Salon, opening it to national and foreign artists, in August 1793 the Revolution

of judgement. There was some license when dealing with 'minor' pictorial genres, such as genre painting or still lives as well as portraits of ordinary clients whereby the painter had the necessary means to act on his own, often negotiating with private buyers interested in works of such genres. But things were different when it came to practising his craft in the major genre, that is, in the so-called 'historical' genre. In this case, which directly interested the Crown and was generally destined for palaces and churches, all power was alienated from the artist to effectively choose the means, content, and destiny of his works.

Thus, by way of comparison and example (and a deliberately anachronistic one at that), it can be said of this professional of the court with many benefits linked to his position that he was as lacking in decision-making power as a senior executive of a present-day multinational corporation. The latter has many privileges linked to his function, but is subject to multiple dictates that surpass him and deprive him, despite all material gains, of dignity, freedom, and autonomy, in principle attributed to a liberal profession. Incidentally, Marat called those artists 'luxury workers' [*ouvriers de luxe*] and placed them alongside 'moneylenders' [*agioteurs*].⁶

Art as *Laissez-Faire*

A third field of issues was constituted by artistic production based on freedom and then elaborated as a reflexive practice, according to the values of autonomy. In this case, the work of producing visual objects came to be associated with values akin to those inherent to philosophy. By overcoming its subjection to the Church under Christianity, philosophy in the eighteenth century had recovered the privilege, laid out in the classical *polis*, of freedom as a distinction from serfdom.

permanently abolished all the academies of all fields – 'the last refuge of all aristocracies', in the words of David, who was also a Jacobin leader. See Michel 1988b, p. 40.

- 6 'The artists, the luxury workers, the merchants, the moneylenders, had only to see their earnings decrease with the revolution to lament the kingdom of the courtiers, of the public leeches ... and sigh for the reestablishment of slavery, which made them glimpse their personal benefits in the return of the oppressors of the people, of the squanderers of the public treasury. [*Les artistes, les ouvriers de luxe, les marchands, les agioteurs n'eurent pas plutôt vu leurs gains diminuer par la révolution, qu'ils regrettèrent le règne des courtisans, des sangsues publiques ... et qu'ils soupirèrent après le rétablissement de l'esclavage, qui leur faisait entrevoir leurs avantages personnels dans le retour des oppresseurs du peuple, des dilapidateurs du trésor public*]. See Marat 1975, p. 219.

That painting and art might become philosophy was what the Jacobin painter David aimed at and proclaimed during the brief interregnum (1792–1794) of the French revolutionary republic before the Thermidorian regime.⁷ Analogously, that art would be made through freedom and pleasure – in contrast to craft production for money – that is, that art would be disinterested, public and autonomous, was what Kant suggested in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, contemporaneous with the French Revolution.⁸

However, in the field of political autonomy (in the liberal sense), which emerged roughly in a period coeval with the freedom of enterprise and with the ‘free labour’ process or wage-labour, the related *habitat* of art, in so far as it included the principle of autonomy, also comprehended new forms of complexity and ambiguity. Thus, for example, the same David – who after having been, until the Thermidorian coup of July 1794, the paradigmatic artist of the Revolution, a member of the fraction which led the Convention and who received commissions directly from it – also stood out after his release from the Thermidorian prison and his return to civilian life in 1795 by opening his studio (now private) to visitation through entry fees.⁹

7 Thus, for example, when he himself addressed the Convention, as a member of the Committee of Public Instruction, David spoke in favour of a national jury for the arts: ‘Citizens, your Committee of Public Instruction considered the arts in all relations in which they must contribute to spread the progress of the human spirit, for the propagation and transmission to posterity of the striking examples of the effort of a tremendous people, guided by reason and philosophy, bringing to the earth the reign of liberty, equality, and law. The arts must therefore contribute powerfully to public instruction. For too long have the tyrants, who even fear the images of virtues, chained even thought, encouraged the licentiousness of customs, thus suffocating the genius. The arts are an imitation of nature in its most beautiful and most perfect; a natural sentiment of man propels him towards the same object. It is not only by enchanting the eye that the artistic monuments achieve their goal, it is by penetrating the soul, it is by leaving in the spirit a profound impression, similar to reality. It is then that the traces of heroism, of civic virtues, offered to the eyes of the people will electrify their souls and make germinate in them all passions for glory and devotion for their motherland. The artist, then, must have studied all impulses of the human heart, must have a great knowledge of nature, in a word, the artist must be a *philosopher*. Socrates, a skilled sculptor; J.-J. Rousseau, a good musician; the immortal Poussin, sketching on the canvas the most sublime lessons of philosophy, all are witnesses that prove that the genius of the arts must not have another guide except the flame of reason. Upon concluding his speech, David proposed a list formed by scholars, artists of all genres and magistrates to form the national jury for the arts’. See David apud Delécluze 1983, pp. 158–159.

8 The first edition came out in 1790, during the Constituent Assembly, and the second in 1793, year 11 of the Republic.

9 See ‘Remains of Voluptuousness’, in this volume.

Both Kant and David were characteristically men of the *Lumières* who sought to formulate new parameters for a field that, like many others, was undergoing rapid restructuring. A new mode of art was laid out, and aware of its historical novelty, it came to call itself, already with Delacroix and Baudelaire, 'modern art'.

Autonomy?

One of the distinguishing features of 'modern art' in the ideological sphere was its declared opposition to certain forms of tutelage and alienation in the arts. In reality, in frequent contradiction with the ideological claims, the artist occupied a complex and ambiguous position, often having to market themselves and their work. The handling of this new contradiction, which was indissociable from the production and circulation of art and of its general condition, finally and dramatically permeated the generation of authors of the first half of the nineteenth century (see, for example, the works of Daumier and Courbet, among others). Such were the daily dilemmas of the authors of romanticism and of early modern realism.

Through this new prism, art began to be made in a realm of freedom, at least in principle. Thus, the artist obtained control of his means of production, previously controlled by the Crown and the Church; analogously, he also took possession of the modes of operation and of the forms he produced. The artist therefore took first responsibility for his work's results, which he, like other small traders and craftsmen, presented directly to public judgement and to buyers (see the emblematic case of David when he undertook a commercial exhibition of his works once the revolutionary period of the First French Republic had ended).

As ethical and aesthetic values, authorial authenticity and poetic sovereignty came to constitute the declared nominal foundations of a new social and artistic contract, on a competitive basis. This often demanded innovations, in light of which respect for the genres and for the academies became associated with the outdated art of the Ancien Regime. Thus was established, in the empirical domain, the widespread dependency of art on money.

Opposed and Complementary Negativity

It must not escape one's attention that in the inverse ratio of the artistic requirements of autonomy and authorial authenticity and the restructuring of

artistic practices into a liberal profession, the exact opposite took place with the general forms of labour and production. Thus a new problematic arose around the symbolic role of art.

At one end of the duality that marked the new problematic, peasants, artisans, small and medium traders lost their own means of work and production. As a result, they also lost all power or productive autonomy. Like the extremely poor before them, the legion of expropriated old independent producers was left with the regime of alienated labour. In such a regime, wage income can vary, but never the degree of freedom in relation to the configuration or final aim of labour, the determination of which came to belong exclusively to the employer and holder of capital, with the power to purchase other people's labour-power.

Therefore, to a large extent in the course of the nineteenth century and for most of the twentieth century, in the period of the productive-symbolic regime of 'modern art', the paths of work in the fields of art and production generally diverged. In the terms of the duality described, at one pole stood the worker, who now had only his labour-power to sell. The worker would be classified as 'free' – 'free' in opposition to the regulations linked to the guilds, but also 'free' when compared to the slavery which constituted the dominant form of labour in the colonies until the late nineteenth century. Finally, this worker was nominally 'free' but deprived of all means of production, alienated from all forms of the product of his labour. In these terms, from the viewpoint of his actual condition, the worker became a double of the slave, since he was alienated even from his own metabolism. At the opposite pole, work in the field of 'modern art' converted itself into a symbolic paradigm of emancipated work, according to the most ambitious of assumptions.

Now art was perceived as a paradigm of the 'liberation of work itself from its social negativities',¹⁰ in Argan's words. From a certain ethical and cognitive angle art began to figure as a utopian horizon or promise for the rest of humankind, which had been denied all right to self-determination with regard to work, and, therefore, excluded from the right to consciousness, whose development is bound to the exercise of work.

In short, the ambiguous and contradictory condition of 'modern art' – founded on the fundamental proposition of freedom and on the permanent comparison with labour trapped within the commodity-form – was always permeated by such ambivalence. Thus, 'modern art' oscillates constantly between strident opposition and the consonant distinction with regard to the general system of value production and circulation.

10 See Argan 1981c, p. 139.

Argan and 'Modern Art'

Let us switch the discussion to another plane concerning the wide variety of artistic techniques and forms from Antiquity to the modern era. When taking the latter as a whole, as regards the scheme of labour regimes – which is certainly liable to fine-tuning – one may note a number of breaks and jumps. Nevertheless, there are also signs of long-term structural continuities.

The specificity of this new plan must be kept in mind. Thus, in the context of the status of labour it is possible to observe a progression culminating in the freedom inherent to 'modern art', but in the field of techniques and forms, by contrast, the judgement of progress does not have any validity. It is obvious that in the universe of artistic practice there are no techniques, materials, procedures and forms that are in principle superior to others. This is a prejudice that existed in the dens (palaces, churches, and academies) of the 'ancien régime' of art. Such a prejudice was swept away amid the transition to the 'new regime' of 'modern art'. The consideration of art must cover these distinct planes, since the constitution of value can be observed on all of them. These processes call for specific analyses. Equally, a historical judgement is necessary in order to situate a mode-value in contradiction with another within the same work, as well as to highlight contrasts of a work with the other, etc.

So far, we have only outlined the problems. The question is how to move beyond criticism toward a new synthesis. Thus, in the field under discussion – that is, art history as an investigation of modes of value – how do we specify identify and pursue Argan's proposed investigative method that is linked to the history of labour?

First, Argan's standpoint or philosophical principle is to conceive of art conceptually as a productive practice or work mode. As such, according to a clearly Hegelian and Marxist perspective – one that turns the work experience into an indispensable condition for consciousness – art will also be a mode of consciousness or reflexive practice, inasmuch as, by clarifying itself as such, it comes to conceive of itself as work.

This carries two kinds of implications that demand attention. The first is that in order to establish the value of a certain artistic form, it is necessary to also compare it, among other objective social forms, with the existing forms of labour and production in the social and historical formation to which it belongs. An example: when studying baroque carving or architecture in Portuguese America, one must not only distinguish specificities, demarcate their novelty in relation to tradition and artistic context, that is, alongside the baroque and other styles contemporary to it in Europe and in the colonies. One

must also conduct a comparison with the slave labour mode in workshops and other manual trades and manufacturing production modes.

The second implication is the following: in order to analyse art history's oceanic vastness, the standpoint chosen by Argan, is the point of view of 'modern art'. Thus, Argan, who in his interpretation of Manet¹¹ applies Diderot's famous motto – 'one must belong to one's own time' ('il faut être de son temps') – also meets the same directive, in principle. 'Modern art' counts then as 'his cause', the matrix of ideas that permeate his affirmations, such as the melodic rhythms of a native language. Argan, like Brazil in Mario Pedrosa's well-known saying, would be 'doomed to the modern' (albeit for different reasons).¹²

The realisation of the critical-reflexive work viewed from the formative experience propitiated by 'modern art' is what gives the historian the warmth of judgement, and the power of close and detailed observation. It forms the unique ardour of committed reflexion. In short, Argan observes and speaks in the first person, without leaving aside reflexivity, because he was formed by modern art.

However, it must be stressed that although Argan adopts the viewpoint of 'modern art', this does not constitute an issue of taste or contingency. His standpoint on 'modern art' is indissociable from his philosophical choice. That is, by conceiving of art as work and (following Hegel and Marx) seeing labour as the fundamental condition for consciousness, Argan *had* to prioritise the experience of 'modern art' because only the latter (in its most critical and reflexive positions) *placed itself exclusively as work*, in the in the sovereign mode.

Furthermore, art history was made possible because the work experience, in the adopted understanding of it and according to its cognitive conditions, is in itself objectivation and project. It entails reflection about the past, determination of the present, and intention projected into the future. In short, work implies historical judgement that is materialised in the present by productive action. Art history was made possible and effective, not as encomiastic history, of personalities or major works – something that already existed since Vasari's book – but rather as a human science; a critique of values and rational autonomous inquiry into the history of cultural contexts and their artistic dynamics.

In summary, according to the critical-materialist platform suggested by Argan – where the condition of possibility of the critical history of art was insti-

11 Argan 1983b, p. 346.

12 See Pedrosa 1998, p. 390. An English translation is available: Pedrosa 2015, pp. 346–354.

tuted due to a synthesis inherent to 'modern art' – art and art history converge and become inextricably intertwined. Critical judgement is the common substrate, which is the historical judgement *par excellence*, or, following Argan in 'History of Art' (and now in *Arte e Critica d'Arte*), 'the artistry and the historicity of the work coincide'.¹³

The Classical: Knowledge of the Present

The opposition between the concept of 'classical' and varied 'classicisms'¹⁴ fully exemplifies the tone of renewal that the intrinsic perspective of 'modern art' (in Diderot's sense) gives to Argan's interpretations, synthesising questions of the past to the current debate.

The investigation of artistic forms from the past also implies the investigation of the constitutive elements of 'modern art' and, correlatively, it affirms the tenor of the latter as a historical construction. In sum, the reinterpretation of the past is dialectically totalised into the primary task of studying the present.

Thus, Argan defines mimesis according to the dialectics between consciousness and the real. Parallel to this, he understands 'classical art' as the historically circumscribed achievement produced by this dialectic. In these terms, classical figurative art, according to Argan, 'conceived as the purest and most perfect of the natural phenomena, reveals in the clarity of its forms the ideal form of nature in its universal essence, which lies beyond any accidental contingency'.¹⁵

It is not these terms that reinstate the duality between spirit and matter – proposed in the third century by Plotinus (c. 204/5–270) and Christianity. Rather it is the general perspective, that is, the one prevalent in the Greek tradition, which took the *physis* (nature) as the supreme instance, in which the *logos* also participated. Put this way, for Argan, 'classical art' comprehends a form of truth 'which is not *beyond* but *within* the things and which cannot be reached by overcoming the experience, but by deepening and clarifying it'.¹⁶

This form of truth – which sleeps at the bottom of things and which *mimesis* awakens as an immanent prospective mode of sensory and reflexive clarification – is nothing but historical material. Its validity is confined to context. Thus, *mimesis* resides in an unstable balance or combination of opposites,

13 Argan 1984a, p. 145.

14 Proposed in the first volume of *History of Italian Art* (Argan 1996, 2001, and 2000).

15 Argan 1996, p. 29.

16 Ibid.

self-consciousness and idealisation. In this way, merging knowledge and idealisation, the citizen of the *polis* comprehends praxis and poesis as opposites: *praxis* as free and conscious action with a purpose in itself, and *poiesis* as the act of production that is neither free nor self-conscious, because it is subordinated to an external purpose.¹⁷

For Argan, the enigma of 'classical art' or of its compound of consciousness and idealisation consists of a historical and unrepeatable specificity, irretrievable by 'classicisms'. In short, such a state of equilibrium – with all its peculiarities and transience – results from the assumption of the reflexive and essential continuity between *physis* and *logos*; an assumption which is irretrievable and which immediately empties out all classicism or revivalism of the classical model.

In other words, the premise of a common principle between *logos* and *physis* – that consciousness shares the same background as nature, a premise from which *mimesis* was the most visible result – was actually inherent not to a timeless and eternal 'being' or principle, but rather to a unique stage of the historical process. Therefore, Argan concluded:

the universality of classical art is not a supra-historical quality, but is identified with its historicity. We shall then say that perhaps in no other period has art so fully expressed the historical reality, as a whole, as in the so-called *classical* period of Greek art.¹⁸

Thus, the metaphysics of the classical ideal or of its timeless value, which nurtured so many fetishised aesthetic experiences over the course of the history of Western art, must give way to awareness of the classical as historical matter. This necessarily leads to the critical review of subsequent classicisms. Argan's critical operation, founded on historical judgement, reveals 'classicism' to be false consciousness of the modes of work and production.

In conclusion, it is possible to materialistically and critically determine the precise ideological function of classicisms (also called 'neoclassical' styles, so recurrent in the Western artistic tradition as the apology of the State-form of the Roman Empire). But its condition is the criticism that dissolves the timeless value of the classical. Through that, the possibility of knowing different kinds of art is founded on the preliminary knowledge of the historical process. Or rather, the reciprocal or dialectical determination between both modes of knowledge

¹⁷ See footnote 3.

¹⁸ Argan 1996, p. 30.

is made explicit. Thus, Argan finally defines 'classicism', in opposition to the 'classical', as a 'concept ... [which] applies to the periods in which classical art is taken as a model and imitated'.¹⁹

The distinctive sign, marking the opposition between the classical and classicism the dividing line, established by Argan's critical judgement, is the latter's refusal to understand the present. While the classical, seen through this prism, already anticipates some of the features of modern realism –, one must note, that Argan elects realism as the foundation and common thread of 'modern art' – classicism, by contrast, is understood as a refusal of the present and of history:

not only implies mistrust in the ability of art to express the present historical reality, but also, by reducing art to the imitation of historical models, it annuls the value of creativity which is inherent to classical art.²⁰

To conclude this stage of the argument, in the opposition between the classical and neoclassicism – which aims at a typology of opposites – one must emphasise the fundamental distinction between, on the one side, art *as an inquiry into the present and self-affirmation*, and, on the other side, *that art which, by refusing to deal with the present, negates itself*.

Such a split will be re-proposed in the examination of other artistic structures, from different historical periods, indicating that, for Argan, the opposition comprises a judgement of value and test of truth, ultimately it is the decisive choice and parameter of his method.

Double Determination

Let us now turn to another example, one that proposes the confrontation between the Christian courtly art of Ravenna – with a structural tributary from Byzantine art – and, in contrast, Romanesque art – curiously and suggestively defined as proto-realist and proto-modern. In doing so, we observe once again the construction of opposites and the exploration of contrasts as the central operation of Argan's method.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Argan 1996, pp. 30–31.

Placing the confrontation of these determinations into a reciprocal relation, a dialectic is engendered. As a result, besides learning about the period in question, the reader will also be able to extract elements of comparison valid for a historical judgement of his own situation. The latter is somehow displaced and put into a new perspective in the light of the past, as in the case of the connection examined below, between the Romanesque craftsman and the modern producer.

So, for example, in the comparison between the Christian imperial art in Ravenna, similar to Byzantine art, and Romanesque art, Argan highlights the former's conception of space, based on its fundamentally chromatic definition as a luminous entity, whose saturation imposes itself on the architectural spatiality.²¹ Correspondingly,

the more stripped-down is the corporeal involucre, the more the soul shines; matter is finite, but infinite is the divine light which fills it. The mosaic not only covers the walls [of the *Mausoleum of Galla Placidia*, Ravenna, c. 450], but replaces them: it bevels the edges, deforms the contours of the arches, annuls the intersection between the planes, imposes overall the law of continuity of light transmission.²²

Situated at a historical distance, artistic practice and its technique will be the object of a *double determination*. The first circumscribes practice and technique, following the terms of the initial moment, that is, according to the original intention. Thus, consistent with the directive of Plotinian Neoplatonism that dictates the absolute supremacy of spirit over matter, 'the mosaic technique is properly the process of matter restitution, from its condition of opacity into a spiritual condition, of transparency, of light, of space', as indicated by Argan.²³

However, another determination is also possible for the *modern viewpoint in which art constitutes a work mode*. Thus, by targeting the materiality of the productive process (of the mosaic in this case), Argan's proposition will highlight, free, and synthesise the work contained in it:

The mosaic is made of small pieces of vitreous materials; these *tesserae*,²⁴ however, are not all the same size, shape, transparency, the same reflect-

21 Argan 1996, p. 210.

22 Ibid.

23 Argan 1996, p. 211.

24 Argan's emphasis.

ive quality; moreover, they are fixed on the plastering mortar on different levels and diverse inclinations, according to the inspiration and experience of the craftsman. The uneven surface thus obtained reflects light, but refracts it in infinite rays, so that it appears full of glittering points, animated by an intense and almost molecular vibration.

The competence of the mosaicist, who naturally interprets a given drawing, consists precisely in giving colours maximum depth of field and maximum surface vibration, as well as absolute tonal accuracy. He obtains these values with the vivacious tessitura of the tesserae and attentive control of chromatic luminosity. Since the material naturally does not allow for colour mixtures, he uses the device of illuminating colder areas (for example, of blues and greens), inserting in the set some warm touches (yellows, reds) or even reducing a very strong hue with a softer one.²⁵

Thus, through the tension between two determinations, historical contexts are dialectically illuminated, observing a pole from its opposite, as will be discussed below. Besides, the work contained in the ancient form, once captured and hidden under the alleged spiritual significance, awakens in the modern historical horizon. In the latter, art conceives of itself as work and, touched by the materialist interpretation, the ancient work practice enters into direct dialogue with modes and materials of modern language. Eventually some contiguity emerges between the two processes. In the case of the mosaic, for example, in different critical senses and giving rise to different judgements and conclusions, one can evoke either the impressionist dot-brushstrokes, or those of post-impressionist pointillist painting, or even the modular and serial brushstrokes of Cézanne, etc. What is the function exerted by colour play in each case? It will fall to dialectical analysis to decide how and where the comparison should be directed each time, between the modern procedure and the ancient one, now reinterpreted from the materialist perspective ...

Power of Enlightenment

The contraposition between Romanesque technology and the aforementioned Byzantine one affords another example. Thus, in the courtly context, technology 'is thought of as a mode of interpretation, refinement and sublimation of matter, reducing it to the spiritual value of the symbol-form', and in this

25 Argan 1996, pp. 210–211.

transubstantiation of matter ... there is a refusal to invent new types and forms, preferring to completely assume the past experience and proceed towards ever greater perfection, of an ever more subtle and even sophisticated stylistic quintessence.²⁶

In contrast, when determining the Romanesque technology, the relationship between religion and technique emerges in combination with the renaissance of the cities, which base their strength and safety not on military power and plunder as before, but rather on wealth production. As such:

[t]he craftsman who commits to a piece of gold or even of a non-precious material, and spends some time of his life, after having acquired or inherited experience, modelling or carving them, harmoniously combining them with other materials, follows, in a certain way, God's creative work; and since God himself created that matter as something perfectible through human effort and, therefore, such matter holds in itself a spiritual principle, human work must not cancel, hide, or demean it, but interpret it and develop all possibilities and forces it carries in itself.²⁷

Argan's method resorts to the constitution of typologies of opposites. As the Brazilian literary critic and historian Antonio Candido (1918) noted of a similar methodology adopted by his friend, the historian Sérgio Buarque de Holanda in *Roots of Brazil*, it entails 'exploring diametrically opposing concepts':²⁸

The vision of a given aspect of historical reality is *realized*, in the strongest sense of the word, by simultaneously approaching both extremes; one concept evokes the other, the two interact, and the result yields a great power of enlightenment.²⁹

In addition to historically situating the relationship between religion and technique, the 'dialectic interaction'³⁰ between both concepts obtains a synthesis between productive economic practices and it highlights the level attained by human ingenuity in the transformation of the materials, as well as their supply.

26 Argan 1996, p. 224.

27 Argan 1996, p. 238.

28 See Candido 2012, p. xxv.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

The outcome brings about the formation of the modern notion of progress and clarifies the structuration of a new production mode.

Since, in the course of Argan's observations, the vivid description of structures simultaneously involves analysis and interpretation of the historical process not as a series of positive data, but rather as a reordering movement of social structures, it is best to follow the development of these ideas step by step:

Romanesque technological revolution is not born of the discovery of new materials, of new tools, or of new operational processes: the latter certainly transform themselves, but in the context and as a consequence of a deeper transformation of culture and social life. As for the materials, the renewal consists, above all, of the employment of not necessarily precious materials: if the value is given by the procedure or by work, it is the greater and the more meritorious inasmuch as one departs from below, from the material that does not have a value in itself. In architecture, the naked wall prevails over the marble inlay; in sculpture, the stone replaces the precious and rare marbles; in painting, the fresco competes with the mosaic. It is also an economic necessity: the craftsman is autonomous, he uses his own forces, the raw materials of his work are not given him by the court treasures, as in the case of the Byzantine craftsman. In contrast, the consequence is the production's quantitative increase, whose costs are limited: art does not remain within the court's limits, but is disseminated and, therefore, starts to exert influence over much larger social circles. The Byzantine craftsman placed at the service of the system, of the political and religious hierarchy, a refined and in a sense perfect technique guided by ancient canons: the degree of ideal perfection can be displaced and even increased, but the structure of the procedures remained the same, its development is not but an ever higher refinement. The Romanesque craftsman is responsible for his own production, he must overcome the emulation, the competition, invent new types to attract interest: his technique is not *perfect*, but *progressive*. From then on, the concept of progress and renewal is linked to the concept of technique: if Byzantine technique is the better the more strictly faithful to the canon and close to an ideal archetype, the Romanesque one is the better the newer, invented. The idea of invention is linked to the idea of progress, one progresses by inventing. The invention presupposes the experience of tradition which one wants to overcome, it follows a historical development: thus, the technique turns itself into history in a society which reaffirms the value of history and its finality. That grounding of experience in the historical pro-

cess rather than in theoretical, absolute and unchanging principles, is another fundamental aspect of Romanesque technology.³¹

Art History as History of Work

The analysis of artistic and architectural forms, as discussed above, characterises them as cognitive syntheses, which are linked to the historical moment. How might we systematise them as art history, in Argan's terms?

Perhaps the best way is to resort to one more couple of polar contrasts and an illustrative parallel. If the cathedral, in opposition to the feudal castle, as a constructive typology invented by medieval man, constituted the 'great common wealth', the 'civic monument' in which 'the community manifests all its capacities' and preserves 'the most valuable things among those produced by urban craftsmanship and what merchants bring from distant countries', then a new art history, in parallel, can also be potentially conceived of (or reworked) as the 'great common wealth' and 'civic monument'.

Moreover, as a form of totalisation invented under modern conditions, art history can also be stated in terms similar to those used by Argan when he referred to the cathedral as 'the living image of the system ... a complex functional organism: [whose] ... space is no longer a space for contemplation, but for living'.³²

Thus, as a living image of the system and complex functional organism which constitutes a living space – as well as a critical and reflexive systematisation opposed to the capitalist system of alienation and appropriation of labour –, art history calls forth a new horizon as *critical and revolutionary history of work*.

In conclusion, from its own perspective, insofar as it elaborates the history of work as it is fully and socially affirmed, art history proposes itself as a monument to the collective refounding of humanity.

31 See Argan 1996, p. 239.

32 See Argan 1996, p. 240.

Political Economy of Modern Art I: Entries for Combat¹

1. [*Modern art and Baudelaire*]. Faced with the conservative wave against the revolutionary movements of 1848 in Europe, modern art, according to Baudelaire, was launched as a response. It derived from the radical cultural values of the French Revolution. As such, it was a response of the radicalised and independent craftsmen imbued with the fury of the plebs.

2. [*Avant-garde*]. Therefore, to blindly speak about avant-garde art means to succumb to the myth of autarchic art, as an isolated and self-referential phenomenon. In central economies or Western colonial powers (which are nearly synonymous), avant-garde art – with the exception of brief revolutionary episodes – did not operate as an avant-garde. More accurately, it served in the rear-guard² and as an act of resistance. That is, it constituted a mode of symbolic struggle against the capitalistic process of modernisation.

3. [*Belle époque, modern art and class struggle*]. In the arts, the project and the critical accumulation envisioned by Baudelaire came under fire from a widespread formalism that followed the massacre of the Paris Communards. Formalism was closely synchronised with capitalist modernisation and the growing functionalisation of the city and all spheres of life. It thereby constituted an ideological current linked to certain tendencies of modernism, those committed to a positive view of modernisation. As an aesthetic doctrine, formalism emerged organically with impressionism and post-impressionist symbolism. In these terms, it carried the values inherent to the ideology of ‘opticality’ – or of the ‘*école des yeux*’ (school of the eyes), as it was called in France at the time.

1 Re-elaboration of the introductory synthesis of the doctoral thesis *A Fabricação da Pintura: de Manet a Rothko* [*The Fabrication of Painting: from Manet to Rothko*], supervised by Paulo Arantes, São Paulo, Department of Philosophy, University of São Paulo, 2000. The new rearrangements and adjustments (titles and intertitles, deletions, addenda, and bibliographical updates) enable the independent reading of the original function, subordinate to the thesis.

2 The art critic Mário Pedrosa used the term ‘rear-guard art’ in a somewhat distinct sense but not in opposition to the one employed here. See Pedrosa 1995, pp. 341–347.

But the question is: how to handle, from such a narrow base, the principles and developments of modern art as a whole?

4. [*Myth and taboo*]. One of the blind spots of the formalist rationale – whose principles assumed the mythological notion of the artwork as a subject endowed with its own reason, completeness and self-sufficiency – consisted precisely in the difficulty of the overcoming of art as a precious commodity or value in itself. In other words, formalism displayed resistance (in the psycho-analytic sense) against the nullification of the finished work's value, that is, the primacy of the productive processes over the results.

5. [*Obsolescence*]. The reason that the modern artist, in general, prioritised productive processes rather than the finished execution was that the general process of modernisation, driven by the capitalist production of goods, brought about the obsolescence of every social form. Recall the emblematic passage of the *Communist Manifesto* about relationships and things previously taken to be solid, which end up by melting into air.³

6. [*Production vs. contemplation*]. Unfinishedness, summary modelling and quickness of execution, the simultaneous production of several works and the multiplication of variants of just one process appeared as distinct ways by which artists sought to establish the primacy of production over the final form. Despite the specific temporalities of art, these approaches were aimed at preventing or delaying the emptying and ageing of forms and work modes even in the field of art.

Of course, this did not characterise a singular or exclusive aspect of modern art. But it did highlight the acceleration that marked the fatigue of materials, modes and techniques. Thus, several of Giulio Carlo Argan's studies of late-sixteenth-century mannerism, as well as of the non-finiti of Michelangelo and certain works by the Venetian masters, emphasise the initial moment of symbolic valorisation of the productive mode rather than the finished work (previously exalted as proof of virtuosity in Renaissance classicism, due to Neoplatonic metaphysics). As such, in the new symbolic status acquired by the so-called mannerist artistic praxis and correlated feelings, Argan pointed to indications of the emerging contradiction between productive schemes and modes (Brecht highlighted similar elements in the text of *Galileo Galilei*).

3 See Marx and Engels 2005, p. 44.

In connection with the poetic and critical valorisation of the productive process over the contemplative one, Argan's studies on architecture and art of the so-called baroque period⁴ critically demolished the idea of the aesthetic discourse as 'discipline or science of contemplation of the beautiful'. They did so by highlighting the markedly 'interested' and urbanistically planned character of artistic production from the seventeenth century onwards. Moreover, they laid bare its ideological tenor, that is, the clearly proto-capitalist strategy of fetishising the product – a trend that had and maintains the directive of establishing the criteria for contemplation or for the exclusive consideration of form (ultimately, of money), regardless of considerations of labour.

7. [*Counter-hegemonic criticism*]. For an effective examination of art's material production and the construction of a correlated critical system, it is certainly necessary to confront the judgements and premises of the formalist historiographical current as well as those of its implicit aesthetic doctrine of 'pure visibility'. Both doctrine and historiography, based on the idea of contemplation, cemented modern art's hegemonic narrative. This conception was widespread as the museums' lingua franca between the late nineteenth century and a greater part of the twentieth century. The narrative held sway until a certain historical crisis and the advent of post-modernism plunged it into crisis. Even so, several hybridisations endorsed premises and criteria with decidedly formalist origins.

Of course, in the field of modern art, there were significant and innovative investigations and counter-narratives undertaken by non-formalist scholars (such as Argan, P. Francastel, L. Steinberg or, more recently, T.J. Clark and many English-speaking historians), or even earlier, in some respects, the historians of iconological or Warburgian matrix, who showed a greater inclination towards ancient art. But in any case, even when they exerted influence, it was not to effectively overcome the mark of authorial and specific studies, or effectively reach a critical counterpoint at the level of an alternative system of modern art.⁵

4 In *L'Europa delle Capitali* (Argan 2004) and other essays.

5 The critical and historiographical construction elaborated over the course of the constructivist-productivist debates, in the years following the October Revolution, certainly constituted a vigorous counterpoint to formalism. It left a priceless set of achievements, proposals and critical constructs largely yet to be discussed and explored. However, in the long-term framework and before the sinister Stalinist Thermidor, which suffocated the October Revolution, their development and impact were therefore limited; they were just sparks.

In turn, formalist hegemony, based on positivist neo-Kantianism, originally Germanic or Viennese in its spoken expression, found major support in London's Bloomsbury group and in other countries at the time. It also laid deep roots as the chief doctrine of Anglo-American museography – for instance, in the development of the collections of the Metropolitan Museum, by Fry, and that of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York, by Alfred Barr Jr. It also endures to some extent in France and in the USA today through revivals of formalism based on neostructuralism. Thus, a resultant eclectic compound currently enjoys wide acceptance in the USA and its zones of influence, hence the world-scale compliance and acquiescence, in studios and art schools, with the New York journal *October*.

Therefore, to effectively reopen the discussion on the formation of modernism, it is essential to carefully review the theses that constituted the mainstay of the formalist systematisation of modern art, namely: the fundamental chapter on Manet as the origin of modern painting and as the forerunner of impressionism, according to the opticalist doctrine; the theses of formalism linked to symbolism; on Cézanne as the 'classical' paradigm of modernism; and, relatedly, of cubism as a non-realist and fundamentally abstract style.

The critical dismantling of the historiographical formalist system must also crucially include revisiting a decisive topic in the history of the rise of North American art: so-called abstract expressionism, which, in the internationally widespread North-American formalist narrative, was read as the corollary of the supposed fundamental postulates of modern art.

8. [*Counter narrative*]. The question, then, is not one of denying the decisive importance of the aforementioned set of works. Nor is it one of merely widening the spectrum of authors and works, as multiculturalism claims. Rather, it is a question of critically reopening the interpretation of the formalist pantheon and canon, seeking to reinsert them in diverse historical situations and points of view, as opposed to confronting those indicated by official historiography in order to expose the formalist interpretative operations as class-based manoeuvres and the extraction of symbolic surplus value.

Against the grain of such historiography, following the investigation practiced by Argan – that is, of realism as the main common thread of modern art – means attempting to successively distinguish, in the works of Manet, Monet, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Braque and Picasso, different results and perspectives of critical reflection whose leitmotiv consisted in updating realism as a mode for exposing both the *fabrication* of art and its processes.⁶

6 The notion of realism adopted by both Brecht and Argan derives not entirely but largely from

However, the decisive experiments of modern art were constituted and must be understood not only in these terms, but also as a mode antithetical to the destruction and standardisation caused by capitalist modernisation. Such was the dialectic proposed by Baudelaire, which took various forms (romanticism and satanism, heroism and epic, etc.), but was always postulated as antitheses to the bourgeois order. It was the that order to which he directed his attack, even before 1848, with unforgettable sarcasm, in the Salon of 1846:

To the bourgeois.

You are the majority – in number and intelligence –, therefore you have the force – which is justice.

Some are *savants*, others are owners; – a radiant day will come when the *savants* shall be owners and the owners, *savants*. Then your power will be complete, and no one will protest against it.

In expectation of such supreme harmony ...⁷

Thus, for example, modern art established itself as a perspective and active mode through a series of criticisms: first, by Daumier against the enthronement of the bourgeoisie in the monarchy of Louis-Philippe; next, by Courbet and Manet against the Second Empire, and soon thereafter the conservative republic; by Cézanne and Van Gogh, after the extermination of the Communards, against the regular devouring of labour by the assembly line; by fauvism and cubism against the inter-imperialist scramble and chauvinist disputes, at the root of the carnage of 1914–1918; by Picasso and Miró against Francoism and the rise of fascism; by abstract expressionism against the totalitarian tenor of McCarthyism and the administered life in post-war USA. In these terms,

the one explained in detail by Nikolai Tarabukin in 1923: 'I employ the concept of realism in the broadest sense, and I do not confuse it in any way with naturalism, which represents nothing but an aspect of it – and, furthermore, the most naïve and primitive aspect with respect to expression. Contemporary aesthetic consciousness detached the notion of realism from the category of the theme to transport it to the form of the work. Reproduction of reality is no longer the motive of realist efforts (as was the case for the naturalists): on the contrary, reality has ceased to be, in any relation whatsoever, the origin of the work. The artist constitutes in the forms of his art his own reality and conceives of realism as consciousness of the authentic object, autonomous as to its form and content' (Taraboukine 1980c, p. 36).

7 'Aux Bourgeois' / Vous êtes la majorité, – nombre et intelligence; – donc vous êtes la force, – qui est la justice. / Les uns savants, les autres propriétaires; – un jour radieux viendra où les savants seront propriétaires, et les propriétaires savants. Alors votre puissance sera complète, et nul ne protestera contre elle. / En attendant cette harmonie suprême ... (Baudelaire 2002c, p. 415).

often anti-capitalist (though only occasionally revolutionary), modern art was repeatedly propelled forward.

The artistic currents were historically based on the values of artisanal mastery and heirs to the radicalisation of these sectors after the French Revolution, but were made anachronistic by the new social division of labour that was imposed with overwhelming force. These currents developed an antithetical and combative relationship toward the new social order. In turn, this resulted in an aggressive and provocative aesthetic discourse, historically and socially grounded, even when apparently hermetical, displaced and unmotivated.

From this perspective, the works of Pollock and Rothko, far from appearing as abstract, can be better explained in the context of the crisis of figuration and of the correlated dialectic between figuration and abstraction, on the basis of the critical-reflective development of realism's main assumptions, as outlined by Tarabukin. That is, realism as consciousness and disclosure of the process of pictorial production. At the same time, Pollock's and Rothko's works did not respond exclusively to a crisis in lexicon; as will be argued below, they also reacted to the tensions of the historical conjuncture brought about by a new imperialist cycle.

9. [*Solipsism, perception and productivity*]. We must also consider the effects of the studies of human physiology developed between 1810 and 1840, which dissolved the ocular system from the subject of knowledge as a whole, eradicating any rational parameter of verisimilitude in the process.⁸

The classical conception of viscosity, which presupposed a monocular and pyramidal visual beam, was subjected to scientific criticism. The latter showed the former to be anachronistic, not only with regard to its foundational diagram, but also in terms of its notion of vision as neutral apprehension of pre-existing natural objects. In contrast, scientific critique refounded vision in physiological terms, based on individual spontaneity, that is, according to an active conception of sentience as an impulsive productive occurrence.

In short, positivity, located in the conception of the body as a spontaneous focus of sensations, converged with the scientific criticism of monocular and philosophical criticism of sensorial passivity. It also combined with the liquidation of the paradigmatic interrelationship between art and nature, once the foundation of aesthetic and artistic tradition. Over the course of this process, the restructuring of the conception of the gaze moved away from the binomial

8 See Crary 1998 and 1988.

spontaneity of reason and passivity of sentience (for instance, that of Kant's transcendental subject). The advocates of opticality (impressionists and symbolists) celebrated the discovery of the spontaneity of the individual sensory core and its autonomy before the objects of vision.

Such a claim carried an undisguised mark of class. Generally, with the exception of the ruling classes, vision found itself directly subjected to heteronomous processes, at the core of a body whose function was changing. The body was now under constant metabolic alteration, following the pace of the assembly line, of serial production, of the new means of transport and of the new paraphernalia of information and entertainment on a large scale. The body was not only entirely separate from consciousness, but – given dissociations and technical dismemberments, due to the assembly lines – endured a heavy metabolic impact.

10. [*The end of the aura and serial production*]. Benjamin's reflexions on the end of the aura and the new technical reproducibility of art, in his various writings between 1935 and 1938, foregrounded two changes. He suggested not only the nullification of the sense of value inherent in the artisanal facture of the work, but equally, given the corresponding end of the uniqueness of the unique object, the critical need to shift attention away from the artistic artefact towards the serial tenor of modern artistic processes.

The basic serial condition, shared with other *fabricated* objects, revealed the anachronism of the critical practices inherent in precious formalist considerations. But seriality also turned these practices into mere procedures of value constitution and reproduction, like the acts of experts who subsidise collectors in their search for what is 'true' or 'false' as lucrative investments.

Not coincidentally, the doctrine of 'pure visibility' was not only born of the reflexive commitment of a collector, K. Fiedler, but also counted among its ranks J. Meier-Graefe, alongside other prominent figures from the art market. Thus, in theoretical terms, this doctrine parallels the economic doctrine of monetarism, which plays a functional role in the creation of value in financial institutions.

11. [*Art processes v. critical anachronisms*]. If modern art has died, as argued by Benjamin and Brecht,⁹ there is still work to be done. For example, it would be

9 In line with the Russian artistic debates, which were in fact avant-garde, and therefore soon criticised by the Bolshevik leadership and later crushed during the long Russian Thermidor (1924–1953) under Stalin.

useful to undertake a reflexive consolidation of the critical advances and the discoveries elaborated by modern art, swimming against the tide of formalist retrogressive reasoning.

Therefore, if work processes rather than finished works are foregrounded, such conditions require research practices and dispositions that prioritise the productive procedures – unlike the formalist analytical regime. Formalism hypostatizes and isolates completed artwork and authorial procedures as distinct currencies or forms in themselves, supposedly endowed with their own internal laws and immune to ‘external’ factors (circulation mode, extra-aesthetic or ‘impure’ forces, etc.).

12. [*Fabrication*]. In effect, if, from impressionism onwards, the series was posed as a potential problem, then in cubism, by contrast, the work mode is based on permutations distinguishing between one work and another.¹⁰ Cubism made the analysis of unique pieces once and for all anachronistic. Since this transformation, the analysis of the whole, that is, of the processual series, becomes necessary.

It is true that often the processual series was not publicly declared as such for various reasons, so the art dealer or painter gradually downplayed the series, reinventing each item as a separate piece.

Even in this case, the truth of the productive practice was intramurally accepted, if only for a few, prior to its public recognition as a current work mode. Thus, the artist himself, even when he owned variations or preliminary forms (as was the case with Monet), did not draw attention to a work mode which was in fact treated serially. Instead, the ideology of organic pictorial structures and unique works prevailed. It was necessary to acknowledge or mourn (in the psychoanalytic sense) the disappearance of the auratic and artisanal conception of art, to admit that drawing, painting and sculpture, the arts in general, could appear as matter, drawn not from creation or inspiration, but from *fabrication*. Cubism took such steps, without fear of demerit, and was programmatically ironic about the exceptionality of the *métier* and of the work.

Thus, one should consider the so-called unfinishedness or summary modelling which affected modern art from the beginning of French realism.¹¹ Such techniques constituted the initial symptom that dialectically corresponded to

¹⁰ See Karmel 1993 and 2003.

¹¹ See, for example, Manet and Cézanne, so criticised at the time for the unfinished state of their works, or the case of Daumier, who did not even exhibit his paintings and terracottas, viewing them as mere sketches.

industrialisation (effectively introduced in France only after 1848). Every modern work, in the ephemeral condition inherent to it, is positioned as one possible alternative among others; the modern work therefore signalled a productive mode and consisted of a mere snapshot or processual moment of a 'work in progress' (J. Joyce).

In short, if the serial character of the process was openly proclaimed, as in the case with Duchamp's notes, or whether or not it was prudishly swept under the carpet by old-fashioned artists, like Monet, is an entirely different affair. The different approaches have to do with authorial strategies. Anyway, from its beginnings up to its emblematic epilogue – so-called abstract expressionism – the most decisive cases of modern art were already openly transient. The condition of transience structurally constituted these works as provisional forms and momentary points of stasis in a process whose originality and radicalism were inherent to the productive mode's conception. Rothko's *boutade* was remarkable in this sense, insofar as he could order his paintings from his assistants over the telephone. He threw this idea ironically at the influential formalist critic Clement Greenberg – himself a paradigmatic example, in the late modern art market of New York, of an actor who took on the role of attributing a value-fetish or uniqueness to the canvas.¹²

Therefore – if I may insist and conclude the theme – from telos or final destination, modern work became a document or ephemeral record of a certain productive mode. Thus, it came to restructure itself, like an act of conscious 'refunctionalisation', into a new order whose progress seemed not to need artisanal virtuosity.

13. [*Civil war*]. In order to retrieve decisive works and concerns of modern art, one must not only rebuild the original context of each issue, work or problem, but also weave a point-by-point confrontation with their respective 'critical fortune'. Materialist history must confront the war-torn field and long civil war of criticism. The inconsistency of formalist interpretations increases in direct confrontation with the object, as much as the object is made explicit in its concrete and decisive aspects before the anachronisms and blind spots of formalist narratives about every fetishised author. In this sense, each tiny element of any historical process may become a 'crystal of the total event' (*Totalgeschehen*), in Benjamin's formulation.¹³

12 '[O]rder his paintings made over the telephone', were allegedly the exact words of Rothko, reproduced by Harold Rosenberg. See Rosenberg 1983, p. 107.

13 'Must the Marxist understanding of history necessarily be acquired at the expense of the

14. [*The battle of New York and the fate of Neo-modernism*]. No dismantling of the formalist rationale can go without confronting abstract expressionism and examining the reconfiguration of the notion of art, suggested by Pollock's works, which constituted an unprecedented and major critical achievement.¹⁴

Abstract expressionism was presented as the corollary of modern art and exalted as an emblem of exceptionality and legitimacy of North American presence at the core of advanced modern culture. Greenberg invoked abstract expressionist painting as a direct descendant from the emblematic cases of French modern art (included in the collections of North-American museums): impressionism, cubism and collage, aspects of the culture of surrealism, etc. Simultaneously, the movement was disconnected from the historical confrontations and clashes of classes, in order to combine and explain it according to mythological atavisms attributed to the intrinsic entrepreneurial character and individualism of North Americans.

Against interpretations set up for luxury commerce and haughty arguments tinged with nationalism, and beyond the crucial discussion raised by S. Guilbaut,¹⁵ some decisive issues remain. In particular, these concern the constitution of the specific form of negativity inherent to abstract expressionism in the face of previous pictorial forms. Thus, before and above imaginary atavisms and cultural lineages of prestige, abstract expressionism's dialectical constitution contained elements that were extrinsic to the artistic sphere, corresponding to pressures triggered by the hypertrophy of the North-American economy, driven by the war effort and military conquests towards unprecedented expansion.

From this angle, intrinsic to the larger historical situation of the USA, Pollock's critical attention stands out. This is distinguished by the contract-form as a new horizon of aesthetic reference, which results from the implication of being salaried by a gallery, as well as the new mode of circulation of his

perceptibility of history? Or: in what way is it possible to conjoin a heightened graph-icness (*Anschaulichkeit*) to the realization of the Marxist method? The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event. And, therefore, to break with vulgar historical naturalism. To grasp the construction of history as such. In the structure of commentary. #Refuse of History# (Benjamin 1999, [N2,6], p. 461).

14 Pollock's achievement was possibly stimulated by his proximity to and contact with Duchamp and Mondrian, who were advisors to the same gallery.

15 See Guilbaut 1983.

works alongside other merchandise. Equally one can distinguish Pollock's precise reflection on form on the basis of *quantitative* factors, which were at the core of the North-American economic boom characterised by overproduction, which expanded worldwide.

In concrete terms, this process was translated into a new pictorial mode involving the accumulation of overlapping layers; that is, by the notion of surplus-form – i.e. surplus turned into a new logic of form in the *fabrication* of painting. The new mode was also generated through corporeal dynamics, as a whole, in the production and reception of painting. Thus, worker-painting, on the one hand, on the scale of the body and absence of mastery; surplus-painting, on the other, born of the abundant offer of materials, including waste, and somehow in synchronicity with the economic pace expanded towards hyperactivity. In this sense, and without absolutely discrediting abstract expressionism, so-called 'action painting' constituted, in many ways, the symmetrical opposite of the logic of crisis and shortage alongside expectation and astonishment associated with the imminence of war. This logic permeated cubist collage and gave it a genuinely dramatic mark – thus greatly detaching it from other late and generally insipid products made with the same technique. By means of comparison, one may consider, for instance, R. Rauschenberg's *assemblages*, 'combine paintings', serigraphs, etc. Rauschenberg's works are close to advertising and to the scenes of commerce and knick-knack shops; that is, of a minor or downgraded history compared with the tragic imminence of cubist collages, during the first pre-war period.

15. [*A critical and tragic synthesis*]. The negativity of Baudelaire's programme for modern art reached its limit of possibilities and obtained its last didactic and systemic moment in the tragic work-denouement of Mark Rothko. The historical-philosophical and materialist rigour of Rothko's work had previously driven him towards the analytical and critical revisiting of some core issues of pictorial tradition – luminosity, tonalism, transparency, contemplation, the organic unity of the work, etc. These were combined dialectically with the materialist and ethical requirements of truth, which translated into the search for conditions for circulation and exhibition, equivalent to those verified in the very act of producing a painting. Simultaneously, the criticism of 'easel painting' led Rothko to postulate a certain critical refounding and refunctionalisation of painting as discourse, for which architecture and theatre played the role of dialogical models.

The Rothko Chapel, as the space at the Menil Foundation in Houston is now called, provided the means for implementing such goals. In this unique project, Rothko elected as a major function of his art the spatial transformation of the

installation into an agora. He aimed at an aesthetic synthesis between painting, architecture and theatre, in the manner of a philosophical construction.

In this sense, the Houston project (1964–1967) also carried through, symbolised or sublimated abstract expressionism's original collective impulse to overcome the exhaustion of 'easel painting'. These works sought to take North-American painting beyond the already bloodless field of framed painting. In this manner, Rothko would follow the example of Mexican muralism – a formative model for a generation of painters constituted during the so-called 'New Deal' (1933–1938).

Political Economy of Modern Art II: Lessons and Modes of Use¹

Painting as Fabrication

As a traditional paradigm of artisanal excellence, how did painting respond to the abstraction of labour inherent to capitalist modernisation?

How does one systematise the decisive responses of the critical and productive expansion of modern art as a specific mode of negativity?

What responses emerged in the historical arc connecting the works from Manet to Rothko? Or to employ a different scale of measurement, what were the possible responses between two crucial workers' defeats on an international scale: 1848 and 1968?

Thesis and point under debate: painting as *fabrication* and Rothko as the last painter.

Against Mummification

So ended the cycle of aesthetic autonomy as an *a priori* notion linked to the freedom of the subject, once regarded as spiritual, transcendental and disinterested. In order to resist the vertiginous acceleration of barbarism, brought about by the new capitalist cycle after 1968, we should consider the influence of supra-individual heteronomy. For if the new capitalist mode does not hold sway over the entirety of production, it has at least become hegemonic in terms of circulation.

Works of resistance and critique have carried a range of assumptions and parameters. These have included overcoming of the artwork and authorship, as well as the general goal of 'de-aesthetisation'. In late capitalism, some

¹ This is a rewriting of the concluding synthesis of my doctoral thesis *A Fabricação da Pintura: de Manet a Rothko* [*The Fabrication of Painting: from Manet to Rothko*], supervised by Paulo Arantes, São Paulo, Department of Philosophy, University of São Paulo, 2000. The new version (titles and subtitles, deletions, addenda, and bibliographical update) is meant to enable the independent reading of these notes.

works – like those by Hans Haacke, K.P. Brehmer, Harun Farocki, Martha Rosler, Allan Sekula and others – established the criteria of critical realism. Today, this critical realism challenges the neoliberal mummification of art inherent in its annexation by the international system of commodity production.

Scheme and Questions of a Formation

Let us also focus on the threshold of the formative process of modern art. Was there a restorationist-conservative modern art, paralleling the modernisation process in which modern art took part? Indeed, but in view of an investigative synthesis concerned with the general formation of modern art, decisive works that generated critical paradigms for the subsequent course of this art were constituted as forms of resistance and symbolic struggle.

In this sense, the determination of modern art as a broad process of resistance and critical reflection requires simultaneous and dialectical reference to the larger process of modernisation. Modern art developed through this modernisation process and against the latter's reproductive mode. If this broader picture is not established, and if the determination of modern art at its historical limits and general principles is overlooked, then this will always result in imprecise and arbitrary findings. This is what was verified in formalist attempts to establish a system of modern art, according to a supposed and inane evolution of forms.

Modernisation as a process and discourse had its cornerstone in the so-called 'Second of December', the *coup d'état* in 1851 of President-elect Louis Napoleon. The latter's terrain had been prepared by the massacre of June 1848 carried out by the armed forces of the bourgeoisie against the Parisian working classes.² Following the brutality of the mass execution in June '48, the class violence of expropriation took place in the two following decades achieving a huge real-estate opportunity through primitive accumulation techniques launched against workers' homes and shops.

In fact, the bloody origin of modernisation as a conservative-restorationist revolution (or 'passive revolution', in the Gramscian sense)³ was ratified with the machinations of the Second Empire, materialised at the coronation of Napoleon III on 2 December 1852, the exact day of the first anniversary of the

2 For the massacre as a watershed and starting point of a new state of mind at the time, see Sartre 1988, p. 32, apud Oehler 2004a, p. 37. See also Oehler 1999.

3 See Thomas 2006, pp. 61–78.

coup; it was hardly a coincidence that this was also of the coronation date of Napoleon I in 1804

In effect, before that, the Orleanist regime – the so-called July Monarchy (1830–1848) of Louis-Philippe d'Orléans – consisted of an alliance of the financial bourgeoisie with the forces of the *ancien régime*. France was technologically backward compared to England and even Germany – then undergoing a process of political unification and accelerated industrialisation, under Prussian hegemony. Only under the aegis of Saint-Simonism and Neo-Bonapartism – that is, of a bourgeois modernisation of the State – was France able to effectively enter a process of accelerated industrialisation and economic modernisation.

Thus, the pictorial response of Manet, as an expression of realism – combined with romanticism and linked to the radical republican opposition – was engendered in contradistinction to the late modernisation of Paris carried out by Haussmann's⁴ programme of urban renovations (1852–1870), which operated through *blitzkrieg* techniques and colonial relocation in order to clear the popular classes from the centre of the capital.

It was in dialectical antithesis to modernisation that 'modern art' developed as an aesthetic, practical and critical process. Alongside Manet, this included his predecessors in painting David, Géricault and others, as well as the contributions of thinkers from the previous century, Diderot, Rousseau, etc., who prepared the French Revolution and the aesthetic transition to the cycle of revolutionary republican art, which Baudelaire saw as the origin of modern art.⁵

In short, faced with the successive successful counter-revolutions from 1848 onwards and with the corresponding barbarism of the bourgeoisie that developed throughout the nineteenth century, modern art was born among the radicalised and anti-monarchist petite bourgeoisie, who fought the order of privileges. Modern art became a strategy of resistance and anti-capitalist expression. In this sense, modern art – whether intuitively or consciously – sought to integrate the field sown with hope by the revolutionary movement of the *sans-culottes* in 1792–1794. This movement was followed by various workers' uprisings, characterising a long civil war that lasted over 80 years. This process began with the 1789 Revolution and unfolded through successive bloody

4 See Benjamin 2003, pp. 373–400; see also Clark 1989a, pp. 23–78; and Löwy 2006, pp. 59–75.

5 See Baudelaire 2002b, pp. 408–410. Text published in *Le Corsaire-Satan*, 21 January 1846 – exactly 53 years after the execution of Louis XVI. See also in this volume 'The Conspiracy of Modern Art' and 'Marat by David: Photojournalism'.

uprisings and confrontations with the bourgeois forces, in 1830, 1831–1834, 1848, 1871, etc., to mention only the paradigmatic case of France, where modern art emerged.

Production, Circulation and Transitional Realism (Manet)

Manet's reinvention of realism occurred after the shift from stereometric representation towards that of the temporality inherent to the subject's point of view.⁶ Manet's painting became the sensory and expressive mode of transitoriness and 'modern life's' fugacity through the primacy of the *sensation*, as Baudelaire argued.

The snapshot, which became one of the primary motifs of Manet's painting and the *raison d'être* for many of his stylistic innovations, led him to attribute to *sensation*, as an operative focus between body and gesture, a decisive function in the production of visual art. Accordingly, the reflexive consideration of spontaneous subjective activity, articulated via the realist prospection of his social horizon, led him to set out the *fabrication mode* of his painting as an effective form of truth.

The explication of painting's process and the documentation of the contemporaneousness of its making, though already verified in the tradition of Mannerism and the Baroque, took on an unprecedented meaning in the new situation. This involved a radical criticism of contemplation in a social order restructured around the commodity. At the expense of all harmony, verisimilitude and symmetry an anti-contemplative stance and exploration of the painting process became the main themes and criteria of realist pictorial practice in Cézanne, Van Gogh and others of the generation immediately following Manet and the extermination of the Communards.

These developments consolidated a realist reflexively enhanced by criticism of the commodity and of the shop-window-city. By explicating the truth of its own process, this realism aimed at a conscience critical understanding of the world. Therefore, the new painting sought to concretely expose the traces of bodily intervention and of pictorial materiality as foundations of phenomenal reflexion, in reciprocal determination with the means and processes of representation.

6 See Martins 2001, pp. 102–111, and 2007; see also 'Parisian Scenes' in this volume.

Counter-Abstraction (Cézanne and Van Gogh)

The historical judgement and the vector of the critique of the commodity-form proposed in the painting of Manet, Cézanne and Van Gogh responded to the depersonalisation and abstraction of labour. Their work synthesised the irreducibility of living labour by revealing traces of its inventiveness and resistance – in the political sense – and correlatively, of authenticity of the pictorial facture – thus, invoking its effect of truth in eminently artisanal terms.

In other words, Cézanne and Van Gogh, by different routes, aimed to constitute an antithesis to the standardisation and abstraction of labour. Manet attributed to art the capacity to describe the new society ruled by market relations that already moulded his time. Van Gogh began to give a totalising ambition to painting by configuring it as an agent for understanding the act of labour as a common and sovereign force of universal transformation. In parallel, Cézanne valued the integrity and autonomy of the aesthetic act, protecting and sanctioning the autonomous course of the pictorial construction against all symmetry and proportionality. What was synthesised at the end of this process was ultimately a crisis of narrative. The latter crystallised in the reduction of the semantic reach of the pictorial sign, of artisanal extraction, or even its neutralisation, outmodedness and capture or reification.

Thus, no matter how radicalised it was, in the transitoriness inherent to the poetic situation – the critical reflexion based on the productive practice as direct expression of autonomised living labour – the emptying of artisanal practice was only temporarily detained.

As a result, the following issue arose: could one, through the manual character of painting, still deal with social and subjective experiences transformed by industrialisation? As a technique and discourse based on artisanal models painting struggled to remain in the front line, alongside other symbolic-narrative devices given by technical mediations (newspapers, photographs, films, etc.). However, Cézanne's and Van Gogh's strategic retreats – from sites and motifs of labour towards outposts that were not particularly urban – were in themselves indicative of painting's growing difficulties.

Multimetabolisms: Cubism as Post-Humanism

The challenges faced by this generation called for an urgent answer. Cubism – already on the threshold of the great inter-imperialist war and aware of the historical anachronism of artisanal work seen as an organic and concrete exper-

ience – faced the abstraction of the productive act as the basis of the new principle of reality. Thus, cubism disarticulated the productive act in art and divided it into parts, recombining them. In sum, the freedom and truth of the artisanal process, objectified by Cézanne's poetic techniques, vanished from the horizon of the cubists. Instead, the cubists observed, as a general symptom, the evidence of reification from which there would be no return and the analogous segmentation of the body, according to the logic of capitalism. This was a body, it must be stressed, no longer re-unifiable as an organism. (In effect, the certainty of the capitalist dismemberment of the body and of the imaginary unity of the human being, long after cubism, accompanied the work of Picasso and constituted the vital node of the tragic epic, which pervaded all of his work, regardless of the succession of phases and styles).

As Argan and Francastel note,⁷ the cubists responded to the historical current condition of abstract labour by means of a renewal of realism. They did so through a reflection on the production mode, which outlined the possibility of serial manufacture in a critical key; that is, in this case, free of all heteronomous determination.

Thus, the new productive forces in painting and sculpture were brought forth in the light of certain methods of abstract and serial labour. Furthermore, the proliferation of cubist works – beyond the spectrum of judgements of taste and in addition to a new objectively materialist inflection in the parameters of realism – disclosed the expansive power of the new conditions and corresponding poetic conception. Thus, Baudelaire's maxim about the change in the nature of aesthetic pleasure was materialised, so to speak.⁸

In short, the recognition of the historical fragmentation of the body established an irrefutable fact. Thus, such an acknowledgment placed the reinvention and autonomisation of fragments in opposition to the stratification of the historical present. The reinvention of parts and their autonomisation potentiated the specific capabilities of each single component and carried out the aesthetic redemption of valueless materials.

7 See Martins, 'Cubismo: o realismo como verdade da produção (Chapter 3)', in Martins 2000, pp. 160–223.

8 'The pleasure we derive from the representation of the present is due not only to the beauty it can be clothed in but also to its essential quality of being the present [*Le plaisir que nous retirons de la représentation du présent tient non seulement à la beauté dont il peut être revêtu, mais aussi à sa qualité essentielle de présent*']'. See Baudelaire 2002n, p. 684.

Such was the exemplarity of collage and of construction-sculpture.⁹ These modes turned into weapons and modes of struggle, albeit provisional ones. During the period before WWI, this work also expressed the corresponding project of the workers' revolution, born of women and men torn apart by misery, imperialist wars and shattering labour conditions. They melt into a collage, a sort of upheaval of distinct materials and fragments, bringing forth a new humanity through the revolution.

Cubism thus concluded the liquidation of the duality between aesthetic exercises and other activities, such as work. By overcoming the limits of the paradigm of contemplation or disinterested judgement, cubism directly engendered rational and utilitarian languages for capitalist production (the architectural rationalism of Le Corbusier, the Bauhaus, etc.). We must not forget, however, the critical radicalised analytic development of cubism, mediated in another situation by the October Revolution: this was analytical constructivism or so-called 'laboratory constructivism'.

The cubist laboratory also constituted a new decisive criterion and strategic stance. The examination of Picasso's preparatory drawings – scrutinised in Pepe Karmel's remarkably acute study¹⁰ – demonstrate the critical tenor of modern art as valorisation of work and the understanding of the production mode against the fetishised value of the image. Thus, cubism consisted in a fundamentally antithetical and critical disposition of modern art in the face of the order established by the *laissez-faire* and the corresponding modernisation process. The latter's urban physiognomy was marked by the exaltation of the image inherent to marketing – a driving force of reification in social imagination – also generated by the form of abstract production and of the corresponding pseudo-naturalisation of exchange relations.

Negation in Progress (Pollock)

Pollock's painting, unlike that of the surrealists, did not aim to leave subjective marks. On the contrary, it hid them by means of veiling.¹¹

Therefore, it can be argued that such painting demarcated itself, at the outset, from surrealist painting. Alongside other factors, so-called abstract expressionism was based on a historical intuition about the exhaustion of the

9 See Karmel 1994, pp. 188–197.

10 See Karmel 1993; see also Karmel 2003.

11 See Karmel 1998, pp. 86–137.

figure's semantic power. It critically required that all forms of this kind should be veiled or nullified.

The tenor of the somatic truth of line and form, validated by some surrealist art, also became the object of critical negation. Line and form, therefore, although deriving from physical action were not used as representations of somatic signs or extra-conscious traces – in the manner, for example, of the paintings and graphic sketches of André Masson and Henri Michaux. In contrast the works of Pollock and most of his companions, were presented as quantitative phenomena or, through pictorial facture, as the accumulation of layers of paint. These paintings involve overlappings as slight obstructions, rather than glazes – or a succession of 'burials', to evoke so-called 'native-american art', invoked as a source reference by many members of the group.¹² What was at stake in such fundamentally negative operations, despite claims of original content? These procedures differentiated abstract expressionist painting from surrealist painting, which served the former as a reference and counterpoint.

Let us take Pollock's work as a landmark. In short, after 1943, by not attributing to figures anything but idiosyncratic meanings – useful only for therapeutic purposes – Pollock aimed at the critical suspension of his own power of formalisation. So, in the end, the burial in question was that of the authorial condition itself. To what end?

According to my hypothesis, if Cézanne's slowness denoted the careful search for truth – extracted from the phenomenal process of consciousness that engendered itself in any given situation – then, in contrast, Pollock's speed conveys a critical pessimism and scepticism towards the validity and power of subjective spontaneity. What is more, it also involved a rejection of new modes of totalisation.

Therefore, the increasing rapidity of Pollock's painting after the war was distinct from that of Manet and Van Gogh – two historical models of swift painting, in line with Baudelaire's programmatic speed.¹³ The latter's works were not limited by form, allowing for the prioritising of dynamic totality, situated beyond all conventions or signs. Unlike these earlier artists, in effect, Pollock's link with instantaneity was that of someone with nothing to lose or to hope for. Thus, his lack of commitment to the future, that is, to the exemplary and lasting character of form, was distinct from the approaches of Manet, Van Gogh and Picasso. In Pollock's case, the bold and tragic task – the situation of

12 See Leja 1993a, pp. 121–202, and 1993b, pp. 49–120.

13 See 'The Conspiracy of Modern Art', in this volume.

a 'new barbarian', stressed by Leo Steinberg – consisted in announcing that he had nothing to say.¹⁴ In other words, as a radically atomised figure in a society long pulverised by industrialisation, Pollock had no expectations whatsoever of reaching either himself or the whole. What else could he do?

He dialectically signalled, as a corollary of such crisis, the symbolic death of painting as a stylistic or authorial act through a parody of the pictorial form that was exacerbated in its randomness.

The insolvency of form as a mental quality and objective was generally established, as can be seen, in the works of the other members of the so-called 'abstract expressionist' group, allowing for differences in chronology and degree. Certain European painters intuited the same thing at the time. Such was the inevitable sharing of historical truth, inherent to the objectification of the general crisis that imposed itself on each author, regardless of the peculiarities in each artistic case. Social atomisation and the excessive volume of the materials available to each individual – marks of a hypertrophied production – caused not only an increase in the volume of waste and detritus, but also disbelief in every form of totalisation as a counterpoint to the total administration of life. These were generic indices; they were not limited to the sphere of 'high culture'.

To a greater degree, they also signalled the new economic, military and political hegemony on a planetary scale, attained by North American productive powers – progressively during the war and irrefutably in the following period. How each artist reacted to such a determination – that is, to the terminal crisis of the conception of form – is a question of authorial economy, which cannot be discussed here.

Form without Meaning or Quantitative Determination

Let us revisit these matters at close range. Pollock, faced with the unavailability of the subject (as a form for himself and as an autochthonous power of formalisation) was left with no other choice but to respond by negating the authorial principle. He did so, in this case, through transferring immediacy or 'automatism' to the materials, attributing his working substances with a quasi-animism.

In this sense, in the early post-war period, Pollock's research denoted disbelief in form and therefore manifested cognitive and ethical scepticism. Thus, in

14 See Steinberg 1975a, pp. 263–267.

the *Sounds in the Grass* series (1946), in which he included paint, detritus and waste, it was not possible to distinguish the prevalence or even the elaboration of a new rationale of production, as had once occurred with cubism.

The sheer quantity and the gigantic scale of the pictorial materials, including the canvas, began to determine the form. Therefore, as with industrial products for the market – in which form meets the criteria of scale economy – in Pollock's subsequent series, the so-called 'drip paintings' initiated in 1947, the final form, paradoxically conserved little or no inner meaning or reason. However, this did not detract from the significance of this series.

As a matter of fact, by observing the inconsistency of arguments between abstraction and figuration, there were those who syncretically invoked the current image of the 'nuclear mushroom cloud', as a hybrid emblem of the time, halfway between figuration and dissolution of form.¹⁵ Nevertheless, one should also consider a hypothesis less easily embodied in figuration and less close to particularism and sensationalism; that of a parody of 'automatic subjectivity' or a subjectivity without inner meaning. In the case of Pollock, peculiarly this was not exempt from a tragic sensibility, as a kind of dialectical counterpoint to self-emptiness.

The Market

In addition, let us retrace one by one some steps in Pollock's work as they are specifically illustrative of the terminal condition of authorship, drowned in a new kind of void. Before the end of the war, Pollock received the commission of a mural for Peggy Guggenheim's apartment. The gigantic scale of the commission was such that it forced the young artists, Lee Krasner and Jackson Pollock, to tear down an inner wall of their apartment in order to stretch the canvas according to the dimensions specified in the commission.

Working on this size shaped the metaphor *par excellence* of the explosion of dimension and scale, habit and relationships, due to the new cyclopean power of the productive forces. This enabled Pollock to foresee the new era of borderless trade, that is, of the market as a new simulacrum of totality, which would be established through the 'peace-form' of the post-war period.

Also the emblematic importance of bourgeois commissions – accentuated here, since coming from the patron-gallerist exercising the monopolistic pre-

15 For a precise critical historical survey of the 'figurative fortune' attributed to Pollock, see Leja 1993c, pp. 275–327.

rogative of exclusivity in regard to the painter – highlighted the new historic role of the contract-form. Of course, now it was not Rousseau's social contract, but rather that of wage-labour – as a new symbolic or generic paradigm.

Therefore, such a commission appeared to Pollock as a landmark inherent to an art without nature or idea in the background; in short, without origin and *telos*, without subject or form as an aim, but with the mediation of the market as an *a priori* foundation or principle.

Human life, driven by new processes, entered the age of unprecedented fission of forms of subjectivity, echoing the overall transformation caused by the hegemony of the market and the new maelstrom of production.

Portrait of the Young Artist in the Monopoly Era (Scheme)

For the North-American producer, the world market was brought within immediate reach. In the mega-market and under explosive growth of the economy, it became imperative either to expand or to be wiped out. The North-American artist did not remain immune to this new form of the 'sublime' – that of the commodity-form's planetary expansion. In sum, the New York-based painter, although an individual producer working within an artisanal tradition, did not escape the whirlwind of an economy massively expanded by the greed of war and the arms economy. Nor did Pollock escape the impact of the offer of materials inherent to the imperial booty obtained by the US. He could not but find himself driven by a general, vertiginous and serial production mode.

In 'rising to the moment', Pollock *dixit*, the young painter was driven, as part of an advanced troop of command and assault, to lead art into the cultural industry.

The course of Pollock's subsequent painting showed that he was tragically aware of, even if not subjectively immune to, the dangers and impasses inherent in the new historical condition for art: this was an art deprived of its auratic authenticity and obsolete in terms of an individual authorial project.

Anti-Epiphany Practices and Other Tactics

Rothko's historical awareness led him to the negation of all individual aspects of painting. From negation of subjective expressivity and of organic unity of the work, passing through the overcoming of bodily marks as an emblem of truth, and reaching a situation of the brushstroke's deliberate depersonalisation,

Rothko's painting came to negate the monadological form of the auratic and unique canvas, in the shape of the epiphany-form.

Thus, his very process of critical and materialist radicalisation drove him architectechnically to consider paintings not as single and unique objects, but rather as a sequential set of canvasses conceived as a reflexive series or syntactical elements arranged in a spatial sentence, like a film montage.

However, Rothko did not deny the realist principle of art as a critical-cognitive act, endowed with exemplary universality – in the Kantian moral formulation – even when he reached an *aporia* or an exasperated and paradoxical dead end.

The refunctionalisation of painting as theatre and dialogic architecture, configuring civic art, demanded by Rothko and, it should be said, also by abstract expressionism in general, was in fact achieved – in an intense but fleeting way – with the works (1965–1967) housed in the so-called Rothko Chapel (1970–1971) in Houston, Texas.

With this cycle of paintings, abstract expressionism's maximalist vehemence reached its extreme and final unfolding. This achievement was also constituted as a pictorial paradigm; a tragic sign of historical unrealisability within a broken social order, an order now blind and deaf to the exemplary and reflective discourse of the canvasses of the Rothko Chapel.

Facing Administered Art

Isolated as a configuration of the totality embodied in the mini- agora of the Houston chapel, only the extreme concentration, mastery and rigour of an uncompromising and uniquely demanding artist made possible this achievement. In contrast to the programmatic cynicism – even if not yet free of some proselytism – of North-American pop art and the subsequent cold executive professionalism of hard edge and colour-field painting, Rothko's works, in the intensity of his negation of the transitive and commercial discourse of art, presented a lacerating form of anachronism in the post-modern world.

Rothko's subsequent painting, in acrylic paint on paper, dramatically intensified the burning streaks left by the brush in the manner of desperate spasms on the impassable wall of a cell. Pungent and intensely expressive – as only the terminal record of a survivor can be – these works resisted on a simple sheet of paper, unceasingly, until the end. The irrevocable truth of the new era had already been announced by Pollock two decades earlier: modern art – as critical and totalising negativity; as the popular war of resistance; as the act of provocation of a few against a faceless army largely equipped to control and plan all

aspects of life – was doomed to disappear. It would become merely a specific subsystem and an advanced practice in the positivity of the cultural industry. The end?

Last Example

Rothko resisted as far as he could and prolonged the resistance of modern poetics as exasperation, making art endure and unfold in a context in which the negativity of modern art's poetic values already sounded outlandish.

Somehow such an end parallels the brave and tragic death of Che Guevara shortly before. This was also the end of a project that had aimed at restructuring social relations, embodied in the combatant's strategy in the name of the whole. In effect, such a unique and exemplary existence, focused on the constitution of a new universality, had embodied a paradigm congruent with the project of modern art. As conceived by Baudelaire, modern art forged an exemplary practice of *sensation* and of the subjective instant, eternalising them on a plane of symbolic objectivity; it did so in antithesis to the advance of the barbarism inherent in capitalist modernisation.

In a way, Che Guevara's myth also attained such an exemplary condition. At the same time, though, the capture and execution in the jungles of Bolivia of the individual Ernesto Guevara, almost alone and without allies, also signalled the historical limit of such a process. An assiduous reader of Baudelaire and later of other poets too (he always carried poems in his backpack)¹⁶ the physician and revolutionary fighter *Che* embodied a historical project that was structurally similar to that of modern art. In this sense, he constituted a critical and universal reflexive perspective, but as a paradigm of negativity, a perspective of exception. Che converted *sensation* into reflection and radical ethical example, launched into the brevity of the moment, so as to obtain, from *sensation*, a synthesis with the whole at cost of a life.

Finally, if it is true that the process of modern art was in line with the new correlation of forces established in the succession of works and interventions by Diderot, David, Baudelaire, Daumier, Courbet and Manet and it was also true that these painters, by seeking to practice at the same time criticism and art, consciously and concretely free from all tutelage, established their commitment with the interpretation of their topicality. And if it is also true that

16 For a personal anthology of poems, copied by hand in a green notebook, among other essential belongings in Che's last backpack, see Vv. Aa. 2007.

modern art developed a markedly provocative and negative character, linked to the idea of art as *sensation* universalised through individual action against the devastation of non-capitalist ways of life, then all these qualities can ultimately be taken as characteristically critical and inherent to the original project of modern art – emerging after Baudelaire's strategic valuation of *sensation*. Equally, it can be argued that this line – according to the scheme of *sensation* or negative individual action founded on the reflexive apprehension of the irreducibility of the fleeting moment and in its ethical and aesthetic elaboration – is now over.

This line found its emblematic endpoint in the defeats of the anti-capitalist movements of 1968 on a global scale. These defeats signalled a sunset rather than an aurora: the final term of a 180-year historical cycle that began with the French Revolution.

Exterminative Logic

Whatever their dissimilarities, the deaths of *Che*, by assassination in October 1967, and of Rothko, by suicide in February 1970, took place according to a combined mode through the exterminatory logic of the very same enemy (US capitalism). Accordingly, both deaths took on equivalent meanings.

The capitalist and genocidal victory, in Bolivia and Manhattan, signalled the impracticability of revolutionary protagonism on the scale of individual *sensation*; that is, of a certain notion of thought and praxis, as ethical and political experience, and as a strategy of direct individual struggle.

New Fronts: Uneven, but Combined

This impasse does not absolutely imply the definitive closing of revolutionary possibility as prophesied by nefarious prophets of the end of history. Nor does it suggest that the subjective and collective possibilities glimpsed in previous revolutions and in the critical and reflexive negativity of modern art could not apply again in the future.

But it does indicate the beginning of a new historical cycle; one characterised by unification of the means of circulation, control and administration on a global but also capillary scale. In relation to the subjective and aesthetic experience in this new era, except in extraordinary situations without any strategic importance, the possibilities of primary, free and direct contact between observer and artwork are extinguished. The form of experience that the sub-

ject, following a Rousseauian perspective, had once conceived in the form of *sensation* as a prerogative or faculty free and unimpeded before nature, is no longer available. A new strategic imperative therefore emerges.

Henceforth, all strategy of struggle and dissent rages far beyond any situation assumed as immediately natural, or chimerical prerogative of freedom as a common and fundamental good. Like it or not, contemporary relationships take place, on all levels, on the territory demarcated by the cultural industry on a planetary scale. The culture industry now operates at the level of the global administration and planning of the economy and ways of life, that is, in the obfuscating light of the conditioning of all forms of intimacy, intersubjectivity and circulation, through the *annexation* of practically every sensation.

Against such a systemic order and an adversary of such magnitude, the prerequisite for critical negativity and radical political praxis, in addition to being founded on historical judgements, must entail a strategy and modes of action, in necessarily supra-individual or collective form.

Thus was reached, in the context of symbolic production and aesthetic action, the end of a process, whose exhaustion – already foreseen by some, such as Kafka, Benjamin, Brecht, Duchamp and Pollock, among others – would imply the end of the cycle of ‘aesthetic autonomy’ as a form linked to the freedom of the subject. Accordingly, in such an idealistic cycle, freedom was viewed rather as a property, said to be transcendental and fundamental. This is now done with.

In short, a new cycle has been established, characterised by the absorption of art as a specific subsystem to the positivity of the cultural industry. The aesthetic and symbolic processes, regardless of certain specificities, are no longer effective and meaningful as derivatives of *sensation* and of direct action or of autonomous and free subjectivity, as had occurred in modern art.

For those who continue to resist barbarism by drawing from criteria proposed by contemporary critical realism, it is essential to take into account the specific novelty of our constraints, which lead to the denaturation and emptying of every sensation or image. One should also consider the factors of supra-individual heteronomy. If they do not totally overdetermine imaginative and artistic productivity, subordinating the latter permanently to the market, at least their hegemonic power is securitised by the circulation and reception of images.

The planet as a whole has been captured by market relations; thus it appears shaped in forms that are uneven but rigorously combined.

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Two Scenes on the Commodity

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Painting as Labour-Form

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Transition from Constructivism to Productivism, According to Tarabukin

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Argan Seminar: Art, Value and Work

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